

April Fool
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John 12:9-19
April 1, 2012: Palm Sunday

I can just imagine the report in the *Jerusalem Citizen-Times*, under the banner headline “Messiah Finally Makes Appearance in Heart of City”:

Supporters lining the parade route waved tree branches and shouted “The people united...will never be defeated.” Organizers estimated the crowd to be half a million. Roman centurion estimate was thirty-five. Touting his universal health care plan and promising to vanquish all Roman oppressors, the Messiah was observed riding a high-stepping, spirited white steed and brandishing a sword and shield. He was quoted as saying, “Watch out, Roman oppressor dogs!”... April fool!

I don’t remember another year in my lifetime when Palm Sunday and April Fools’ Day collided. Which is too bad, because in a way, they seem made for each other. Observers on that parade route might well have thought that this Messiah was a hoax, playing some sort of prank or practical joke. They had waited forever for this Anointed One who would bring them salvation. And, indeed, the picture they had in their imaginations was more like the warrior of the fake news report than what they got.

So, let’s start with a little April Fools’ Day quiz. Does anybody know in what country April Fools’ Day originated? Any guesses?

You may be surprised to learn that April Fools’ Day began in Iran—in 536 B.C.E. Iranians still head for parks and gardens on this day, known as Sizdah Bedar, to have picnics, play games, and participate in what Wikipedia calls “the oldest prank tradition in the world.”

The idea spread from Iran around the globe. In France and Italy on this day, people try to tack a paper fish on the back of a prank victim without being detected—and then run away shouting “April fish!” Our younger listeners may appreciate that in Belgium, children lock their teachers out of their classrooms and parents out of their homes, letting them back in only if they produce treats. In Korea, people send each other bowls of snow and jokes.

Anybody know what CNN named the biggest hoax ever pulled off by a reputable news organization? It’s known as the “spaghetti tree hoax.” On April 1st of 1957, BBC broadcast footage of a family in southern Switzerland gathering a bumper crop of spaghetti noodles off of trees after a mild winter, proudly announcing the eradication of the despised pest, the spaghetti weevil. Accompanying the scenes of this traditional Swiss Spaghetti Harvest Festival was a report on cross-breeding techniques used to develop a strain of spaghetti with strands of perfect length.

So, I suppose it needs to be said that in 1957 spaghetti was not a universal phenomenon well-known beyond Italy. An estimated 8 million people watched the program, and hundreds phoned BBC the next day for more information on spaghetti cultivation and tips on acquiring and growing their own spaghetti trees. Staff at the BBC apparently suggested to callers that they “place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best.”

Taco Bell executives pulled a good one in 1996. They took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* announcing that, in order to help reduce the nation’s debt, they had purchased the Liberty Bell and renamed it the “Taco Liberty Bell.” Mike McCurry, White House press secretary at the time, played along and, when asked by reporters about the sale, mentioned that the Lincoln Memorial had also been sold—to the Ford Motor Company—and would henceforth be known as the “Lincoln Mercury Memorial.”

Other notable April Fools’ Day farces include “Smell-o-vision,” a 1965 announcement by BBC executives that they were conducting a trial in which odors would be transmitted over the airwaves, allowing viewers to smell what they were seeing on their TV screens. Reportedly many viewers called the BBC the next

day to report the trial's success. And, mocking the computer industry's "read only" software, in 1972 some innovative entrepreneurs announced with great fanfare a new breakthrough—"write only" software, which could not be read. Sales were brisk.

Well, back to Palm Sunday. Theologian Walter Wink writes in his compelling book *Engaging the Powers*, "Consistent with all that he has said and done, Jesus enters Jerusalem farcically, on a donkey." All four of the gospels record this event that has come to be known as "the triumphal entry." And all make a point of saying that the animal on which Jesus rode was not just a donkey, but a colt—a young donkey, which, according to gospel writers Mark and Luke, was a beast "on which no one had ever sat."

So, in equestrian language, this young donkey was "unbroken," a fact that must have only added to the comedy of the situation. Luke says that his disciples had to set Jesus upon it. I can imagine that it may have taken all twelve of them to catch, hold, lead, and calm the frightened animal.

Jerusalem of Jesus' day was surrounded by walls, with gates that had names like Sheep Gate, Lions' Gate, and Dung Gate (which, fortunately, did not come with Smell-o-vision). Wink writes that Jesus entered from the east side, where the Horse Gate was located. And that if in fact Jesus came into the city through that gate, the irony of the entrance would have been all the greater.

On seeing Jesus, the people in the large crowd that had gathered for the annual Jewish festival of Passover waved branches from palm trees and shouted "Hosanna!" *Hosanna*—which for a long time I believed to be simply an exclamation of adoration and joy, like *hallelujah*—actually means in Hebrew, "Save us, we beseech you!" It was a plea, not a praise.

Our passage tonight from John's gospel paraphrases Zechariah 9:9—"As it is written: 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'" The book of Zechariah was written soon after the early Jews, our ancestors in the faith, returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity and exile, and began rebuilding their destroyed temple. The book's first eight chapters are filled with visions and oracles from a prophet believed to be part of the temple's "inner circle," one who emphasized the priestly hierarchy and the importance of worship and sacrifice.

An abrupt change in perspective takes place beginning in chapter 9. Biblical scholars generally agree that the second part of Zechariah was written by an individual or group on the social margins—folk increasingly disillusioned with references to a return to the "glory days," convinced that change was not going to come from a priestly hierarchy centered in Jerusalem.

The prose visions of horses, chariots, fire, and crowns of the first part of Zechariah give way to a poetic image of peace in the second:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth...
Return to your stronghold,
O prisoners of hope.* [Zech. 9:9-10, 12]

I find it interesting that when referring to the coming of peace—and an end to the dominantly male pursuit of warfare—the prophets often named Jerusalem and all Zion (or Israel) as Daughter. Like this king of

Zechariah, Jesus would have been hard pressed to pick a more humble and absurd posture than entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The donkey symbolized his intention of peace. A horse would have sent a very different message.

I made a visit to the Holy Land with some seminary colleagues in the spring of 1997. On May 31st at about sunset, within an hour of our arrival in Jerusalem, we were inside the old gated city. It was the feast day of Mary for Orthodox Christians, and from our right came a large throng following a statue of the Mother of God draped in garlands of roses. It was a Saturday, the closure of Sabbath for Jews, and from our left came an equally massive and regal procession following an ancient copy of the Torah held high by rabbis. Though they turned before meeting, I remember feeling breathless with awe at the beautiful convergence of these two religious traditions in such a small space.

But that feeling quickly faded. The next day, while we were eating pizza in a plaza in the center of Jerusalem, a siren sounded, and members of the Israeli army converged on a duffle bag in the street. Fearing a Palestinian bomb in the wake of a recent massacre of Israeli school children, they blew up the bag. Turns out it contained someone's gym gear.

Four days after that, on June 5th, we were visiting the Palestinian peace group Sabeel when we heard explosive noises in the street. Our hosts immediately cringed and ducked their heads, fearing Israeli bombs. It turned out to be Israeli youth marching through the streets with flags and firecrackers, beginning their celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Six Day War, during which Israel took military control of the Palestinians and possession of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The convergences in Jerusalem are far from peaceful.

That experience gives me a bit of a sense of what the city was like on the day that Jesus entered. It's likely that a second "grand entrance" was happening that day as well. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, maintained his chief residence and office at Caesarea. Smart man—Caesarea is on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, at the beach. But Pilate also had headquarters in Jerusalem—sort of like our governor's Western North Carolina residence. A footnote in my study Bible says that "because of the large crowds at Passover, [Pilate] came up to Jerusalem to help keep order."

He may well have been arriving with his entourage from the west at about the same time Jesus was entering from the east. They represented two very different types of power. And they were headed for a showdown.

We already know that the Jewish leaders were angry at the number of followers Jesus was attracting. So angry, in fact, that they wanted to put Lazarus, whom Jesus had recently raised from the dead, back to death. The miracle of his resurrection had brought many new believers to Jesus. A crowd was present when Jesus went to the cave where Lazarus had been buried and ordered the stone to be rolled away—over the protests of Lazarus' sister Martha that the stench would be unbearable. At Jesus' command, his dear friend, the one formerly dead, stumbled out of the cave, the strips of burial cloth still clinging to his face, hands, and feet. Many in the crowd became believers that day, but a few ran to the chief priests and Pharisees, the Jewish leaders, to report what had happened.

The 11th chapter of John tells us that the religious officials called together a meeting of the council, and lamented, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our temple and our nation." The appeal to fear. Caiaphas, the high priest, answered: "[I]t is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

"So from that day on," says John, "they planned to put him to death." And, John reports, "Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews." He went into hiding with his friends, in the wilderness town of Ephraim, which the prophet Zechariah mentioned in his vision of peace. As people began converging on Jerusalem for the Passover festival, many were scanning the crowd, hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. But, says John, they were asking one another, "What do you think?"

Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" They understood the power of the threat, the need for Jesus to "lay low" for a while.

Meanwhile, Jesus made his way with his disciples to Bethany, just east of Jerusalem, back to the home of his dear friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They shared dinner, and then Mary rose and took a pound of nard, a perfumed ointment, and anointed Jesus' feet. Everyone—except apparently Judas, who protested—knew exactly what it meant. Mary was preparing Jesus for burial.

I can hardly imagine a more poignant scene. United in their joy at the return of Lazarus, the beloved companions now faced the imminent death of Jesus. Mary understood that Jesus had risked his life to save her brother, and now he would have to pay—a price far more than that of the costly ointment with which she anointed him.

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and Pilate and his cohorts from the west, for the inevitable showdown.***

So Jesus and his friends arrived in Jerusalem from the east, and Pilate and his cohorts from the west, for the inevitable showdown that culminates later in the week at Pilate's headquarters. Accuser facing accused. A governor mocking a Messiah: "So you are a king?" It's a way of saying, "If you're a king, where's your power?"

Jesus tries to explain it to Pilate. "My kingdom is not from this world." Pilate fails to grasp it. This is power he can't comprehend. The power he knows is the power to taunt, flog, condemn, crucify.

"Do you not know that I have the power to release you, and the power to crucify you?" Pilate says to Jesus.

"You have no power over me," Jesus answers him.

The people in the crowd put the pressure on Pilate: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

It all comes down to this in the end. Where are your loyalties? To whom do you give your allegiance? What power rules your life? We know how this particular confrontation ends: Pilate hands Jesus over to be executed.

Five days before, on the day of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem which we commemorate today, that scene ends, according to John, with the Pharisees grumbling to one another: "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

"You can do nothing." A statement of the limits of worldly power. Had the crowds stayed loyal, had they not turned on Jesus, the authorities indeed would have been powerless to do the dirty deed they had set out to do. But even so, as we'll celebrate next Sunday, in the end they were still powerless. In the end, the power of God, the power of life, won out.

And that is why, as the prophet Zechariah calls those who believe, we can claim to be "prisoners of hope." Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa picked up that phrase and often referred to himself as a prisoner of hope.

On March 13th, 1988—in the days when the system of racial hatred and separation known as apartheid still had a stranglehold on South Africa—I was in St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town. Thousands of people were in police detention as a result of their anti-apartheid activities, and church leaders were being threatened and persecuted.

The cathedral was overflowing with humanity that day. Three thousand people were packed into the aisles, the choir loft, the spaces around the pulpit. Police had set up roadblocks around the black townships outside the city to keep the young people away. An elderly woman sitting next to me smiled and said, "They'll be here."

And sure enough, just before the service began, they surged into the cathedral. Hundreds of young people electrified the air with their energy, flowing like a river of hope, dancing the freedom dance known as the *toyitoyi*. The congregation rose, cheering, and then burst into the singing of freedom songs.

As police in riot gear amassed outside and surrounded the cathedral, the preachers inside preached. They thundered their hope. Archbishop Tutu shouted to the brutal enforcers of apartheid, "You are not God, you are mortals....You have already lost. Come and join the winning side!"

We are entering a difficult week, walking through the Passion of Christ, with all its threats, betrayal, abandonment, torture, and death. What gives us the strength to do so is what gave Jesus strength: we know the ending of the story. We know who holds the ultimate power. We are prisoners of hope.

Now, some people hearing that may shake their heads and declare that we're out of touch with reality. "You've got to be kidding," they might say of our hope in the midst of a world that, like the city of Jerusalem, is still so full of division, suffering, and pain. But, friends, we know—we ain't no April Fools. We have joined the winning side.

Amen.