

Easter Sunday 2018: Matthew 28:1-20

There have been some great April fool jokes haven't there, from the spaghetti trees to 3rd class train carriages and the great chalk duck. But isn't the Christian faith just as foolish? Isn't it just an April fool, albeit one that has billions of people convinced? Is that what the Christian faith is about?

Richard Dawkins, scientist, renowned atheist and author of the God Delusion has said some harsh things about religion and Christianity in particular:

Faith is belief without evidence and reason; coincidentally that's also the definition of delusion.

He goes on to say this:

The Bible should be taught, but emphatically not as reality. It is fiction, myth, poetry, anything but reality.

Wow. That's quite a critique. And he's not alone. Most people in the UK today think the Easter story is a joke, a glorious April fool, and the biggest fools are those who believe it! And it's not hard to see why they think like that because to a casual observer it does all look rather ridiculous.

Let's start with Palm Sunday! Apparently, Jesus made his way into Jerusalem on a donkey! What a joke! If he was their rightful King, he had a funny way of showing it! A conqueror arriving in the capital city on a donkey – what a laugh!

And the followers of Jesus- what a hopeless bunch! If they are an army ready to change the world then they sure don't look like it. They're a motley bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, rebellious rejects and backwater nobodies. Hopeless, hapless, clueless and spineless - because when things get tough, they clear off! The disciples – what a joke!

And pretty soon the wheels come off the whole thing don't they. Jesus, the one who claimed he came to bring freedom, ended up in chains. Can't you see the joke there! And it gets worse! His only crown is a crown of thorns! That's hardly royal. He does get to wear a purple robe, but that doesn't even belong to him! Jesus the King! My sides are splitting! It's a joke, it's an April fool!

And, of course, the clinching moment, the punchline to end all punchlines, is that King Jesus doesn't end up on a throne, he ends up on a cross. He says he's a Saviour, but he can't even save himself! Surely the crowds around him have got it right! They are laughing at him not with him. He's a laughing stock, a fraud, the biggest April Fool there has ever been, and so are those who believe in him. Christians are mad as March hares, trusting in a King who rode a donkey, whose crown was made of thorns, whose throne was a cross and whose end was the grave. Forget Ken Dodd or Tim Vine or Milton Jones or any of the great stand-ups, this is the funniest load of nonsense of all time. Surely Christianity is nothing more than an April fool that should have us and laughing in the aisles.

That's what the majority of the country think about us- perhaps that's what some of you think if you're honest. And if the story had ended on Good Friday with a dead Jesus lying in a stone-covered tomb then surely those laughing at the Christian April Fool would be right.

But that's not how it ended is it. That was Friday but Sunday was coming. The great joke of Easter is that it wasn't a joke.

Let's hear the end of Matthew's Gospel and see who the fools are now...

Bible Reading: Matthew 28:1-20.

Dead, buried, done. Those followers of Jesus had been shown up for what they were: deluded fools who'd backed the wrong horse. No wonder they were hiding!

But that's not quite right is it. Some women headed to the tomb. Jesus burial had been rushed, they hadn't been able to properly prepare his body for the grave so at first light on the first day of the week they went down to finish the job. Last rites. That's all. One final act of devotion. A final fool's errand- or not, as it turned out.

Because on the way, verse 2 tells us that there was a violent earthquake: an earthquake caused by an angel of the Lord coming down from heaven and rolling the stone away from the tomb. The guards on duty were paralysed by fear, so much so they fell to the ground, helpless watchers as the angels gave the women some startling news. It's there in verses 5 and 6.

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

The women were startled, shocked, afraid but also filled with joy. They set off to tell Jesus' disciples the news when suddenly they saw him themselves. There was Jesus, standing before them, alive, restored, radiant and real with a physical body so they could clasp his feet as they bowed in worship. Who were the fools now?

And just as the angel said, just as Jesus said in verse 10, the rest of the disciples saw him as well. We see one of those encounters from verse 16 onwards, but there were many more. Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (that's Peter), and then to the 12. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."*

Now I know this is astonishing and it sounds like an April fool. I know this is out of the ordinary. I know this is not part of our regular experience. People who have been buried do not come back out of the grave, let alone ones who have been flogged to within an inch of their life and then publicly crucified. It is an incredible claim and the gospel writers acknowledge that.

At the end of Mark's gospel, the women are initially so scared they can't tell anyone. Even here in verse 17, some of Jesus closest disciples don't get it. They don't understand, they don't see how this can possibly have been real. You might agree. You may think it is foolish to believe this, but what Matthew is saying, and what Paul is saying, is that this was not an isolated sighting. Jesus appeared many times over a period of about 40 days – and at the time of Paul's writing many of those who saw him were still alive and you could have gone and checked the facts with those eyewitnesses.

Of course we can't do that now can we. All those who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus have now died themselves. So are we April fools to believe their accounts? How can we know the truth?

I want to suggest 3 bits of evidence that show us that believing the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus is anything but foolish. And then I want to end with a challenge. Because if this is true, and you don't believe it, then the April fool is you.

1: The predictions

Apparently, President Roosevelt was desperate to find a one armed economist because every time he asked for their advice they'd say "on one hand....but on the other hand...!" The economists advising him were always hedging their bets. But Jesus doesn't hedge his bets. Throughout his ministry he told his disciples again and again that when they got to Jerusalem he would be arrested, tried, beaten, killed and buried but on the third day he would rise. And he was as good as his word.

Now I don't know about you, but if someone's predictions of the future come true, particularly in something as astonishing as this, I'd want to know why. I'd want to know who they are and how they could possibly have known that was going to happen. And then I'd want to know what else they have said so I could take note of that too.

Jesus' predictions of his own death and resurrection is a piece of astonishing evidence, but there's more, because the Old Testament has hundreds of predictions made centuries before Jesus that not only predicted accurately his coming, his birthplace and the kind of ministry that he would have, but predicted in incredible detail the manner in which Jesus would die. And since when Isaiah chapter 53 was written crucifixion had not yet been invented, that is extraordinarily compelling.

2: The first witnesses

Who were the first people to see Jesus? They are women. Matthew gives us two names, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who Mark names as the mother of James. Initially you may not think anything of that, but at the time, women's testimonies were not admissible in court. They weren't thought of as reliable witnesses. So why on earth would the gospel writers have claimed that the women were the first people to see Jesus alive if their testimony would not stand up in court. It doesn't make any sense – unless it was true!

3: The transformed disciples

In verses 11 to 15 Matthew explains the alternative version of events that, by the time he wrote his gospel, were widely believed by many of the Jews. It's a story of body stealing disciples but it's a story that doesn't make sense for three reasons.

Firstly, if you are going to steal a body from a tomb, why would you leave the grave clothes behind as Luke and John explain in their gospels? Jesus had been brutally beaten, scourged and then crucified. There would have been all kinds of revolting bodily fluids still oozing out of his body, while earth would you have left the grave clothes behind?

And if it was grave robbers instead of his disciples, then that makes even less sense. The grave clothes would have been worth a fair amount of money, the body would have been worth nothing!

Secondly, if the disciples had stolen the body it would not have been difficult for the authorities to figure that out, recover the body and end once and for all these rumours of a resurrected Jesus. Israel is not a big place. Jerusalem is actually a tiny city, even now it still only roughly the size of the St Nicholas estate. With all the might of the Roman army and the powerful Jewish religious establishment, if Jesus' body had simply been stolen, it would have been found.

But here's the clincher. Thirdly, the disciples were transformed. In verses 16 to 20 Jesus gives them this commission: *"Go out and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

And that is what they did. They went out from Jerusalem, through Judaea, through the neighbouring countries and to the ends of the world telling people that the donkey riding, crown of thorns wearing, crucified, dead and buried Jesus had risen from the dead and that they had seen him. They spent their energies on it, risked their lives for it, in some cases they even gave their lives for it.

People will often die for things they believe. Islamic terrorists do it for their own reasons and a French police officer did that just a few days ago, for a more gallant purpose. But people do not give their lives willingly for things they know to be a lie.

The disciples came out from hiding away in an upper room the disciples of Jesus became bold and brave proclaimers of the Gospel because of the truth of the resurrection. They were not fools. They were not foolish. Because Jesus is not a fraud or a fake or a phony. He is the Saviour who gave his life as a ransom for many. Jesus is the cross-bearing, forgiveness winning, earthquake-making, death-defeating, gloriously-ascending and one day returning King and judge of the whole world. And if you do not understand that then it is not the disciples of Jesus or the Christians today who are the fools it is you. It is you.

Over the course of Lent we have been running a Life Explored course which has shown us that the God of the Bible is a good God, a trustworthy God, a generous God, a liberating God, a fulfilling God, a life-giving God and a joyful God. And that all sounds wonderful, because who wouldn't want to know a God like that, but those claims stand or fall on the resurrection of Jesus. If that event is a fraud and a fake and an April fool, then the God of the Bible is a lie. But if it is true, then there is nothing more important for you to discover, no one more important for you to meet, nothing more certain on which to base your life than Jesus and his death for you and his mighty resurrection from the grave.

And the wonderful thing is that Jesus welcomes both the fools and the wise into his kingdom, just as he welcomes the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the good and the bad, gay and straight, men and women of every colour, of every language, from whatever religious or irreligious background you may have had: the invitation to come in repentance and faith, to become a follower of this crucified yet risen Saviour is there for all, just as his promise of full and free forgiveness and eternal life is there for all who ask.

Becoming a Christian and following the crucified but risen Jesus is not foolish, no matter what the personal cost might be. Not only is the future hope and present reality Jesus promises to his followers truly glorious, far outweighing any cost we may face, but, as we've seen this morning, the predictions of his death and resurrection, the first witnesses, the empty tomb and the transformed disciples make such a compelling case that it would be utterly foolish to ignore him and to live life without him.

And if you are a Christian already, let me ask you this question: how has the fact of Jesus' resurrection affected you? Does looking to that fact bring you hope in times of trouble, take away your fear of death and give you boldness in your witnessing to Jesus or are you, really, just as gloomy, fearful, and concerned by the reaction of people to the gospel as everyone else? Friends this is Easter Day and the resurrection of Jesus should be the event which shapes your worldview, your attitudes, your hopes, dreams, words and actions more than anything else. If you are a Christian you are a child of the resurrection; with other Christians 'Easter people', and you need to live like it. Are you? Will you?

Others might think you're foolish. Some may scoff, some may laugh, some may leave, some may throw abuse and accusations and say you have lost your mind. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as one of the most attested, evidence-based facts in the whole of history. And if you doubt that, if you reject him, then you are an April fool indeed.