

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. I want to begin this morning by reading John 20:1-31, John's account of the resurrection. Leading up to this, Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, abandoned by his disciples, unjustly accused of blasphemy – making himself out to be God – by the Jews, and crucified and killed by the Romans, and in the tomb for a couple of days.

**John 20:1-31** - *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" <sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes, <sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. <sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." <sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." <sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen*

*the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." <sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." <sup>30</sup> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

This morning we are gathered together on one of the most important holidays. Not Easter. I am talking of course about April Fool's Day. I'm joking, sort of, but not really. Because this message, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, for the sins of the world, is a message filled with foolishness. Not that it is a joke, or that it is untrue, because it is neither of those things. But there are so many elements of this story that are foolishness to the world, so many aspects that fly contrary to human reason and expectations, that I wanted to take advantage of the confluence of these two holidays to look closer at the foolish reality of Easter this morning. And just in case you think I am being irreverent, listen to what the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31:

***1 Corinthians 1:18-31** - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." <sup>20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. <sup>26</sup> Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so*

*that no one may boast before him.* <sup>30</sup> *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* <sup>31</sup> *Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

Paul says that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. He proclaims that the message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, non-Jewish people. **So let's begin by answering the question, what is the message of the cross?**

Paul defines the message of the cross later in the letter:

*1 Corinthians 15:1-8 - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.* <sup>2</sup> *By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.* <sup>3</sup> *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* <sup>4</sup> *that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,* <sup>5</sup> *and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.* <sup>6</sup> *After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.* <sup>7</sup> *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,* <sup>8</sup> *and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

This is a creed that is dated to about 25 years after Jesus' death, while there were still eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection around. The message of the cross is called the gospel, by Paul, a word that means good news. **And Paul writes that the gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins.** He was buried, and rose again on the third day. The message of the cross is part of the larger Biblical story, that in the beginning, the triune God created us out of the overflow of His love to enjoy a relationship with Him, to be His image bearers in this world. But we rebelled, sinned against Him, and as a result that fellowship was broken. And because a holy God can not have sin in his presence, we are destined for an eternity separated from God unless there is an intervention. God worked through the family of Abraham, and then the people of Israel, to try to bring the world back to Him. But the people who were supposed to be part of the solution continually became part of the problem. And so God promised that He would send a Messiah, an anointed ruler, to save His people. And so the eternal Son of God, Jesus, came, born of a virgin, to live the perfect life we could not live, and to die a sacrificial death on the cross in our place, in order to offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who would turn from their sins to trust in Jesus. Through Jesus' death and resurrection,

a way has been made to be restored to the relationship with God that we were designed to enjoy, both now and beyond the grave forever.

**John 3:16-18** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

This message, Paul says, is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. Why is that so?

Let's begin with the Jews. In v. 22, Paul writes that the *"Jews demand miraculous signs."* The Jews believed that the Messiah would come as a conquering hero like Moses, liberating them through miraculous signs from Roman oppression, triumphing over Israel's enemies, and restoring the glory to their nation. And so when Jesus died on the cross, the Jews dismissed him as a false Messiah. In fact, there had been many would-be Messiahs before Jesus who had also died and been eventually forgotten by time. What is more, Jesus had been hung on a cross, and according to **Deuteronomy 21:23**, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." The concept of a "Crucified Messiah" was an oxymoron. But now the disciples are going around proclaiming that this Jesus is the Messiah, that He rose from the dead, and that He came not to defeat Rome but to defeat Satan, sin, and evil itself, to not just give political freedom, but eternal freedom. **This gospel message is a stumbling block to Jews, who could not see a crucified criminal as the Messiah.**

**Secondly, not only the cross, but the resurrection was also a stumbling block to the Jews.** After all, not all the Jews believed in the resurrection from the dead, but those who did believed in a communal resurrection of the righteous at the end of time. They did not believe that anyone would rise from the dead in the middle of history. And so to go around proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead would have been another stumbling block to the Jews.

What about the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people? Paul goes on to say that it is foolishness to the Gentiles, who according to verse 22 *"look for wisdom."* The Greeks loved learning and philosophy, and conceived of God as the ultimate reason in the universe. But here is Paul, proclaiming a message that an executed criminal from a despised race in some backwater province of the kingdom is none other than the eternal Son of God, and that you can have eternal life by repenting

of your sins and putting your trust in Him. That is the highest wisdom? The ultimate reason? **And then there's the issue of the resurrection.** The Greeks and Romans of Paul's day believed that the soul was good and the body was corrupt, and that the goal of death was to escape the prison of the body. But here is Paul, proclaiming that Jesus has risen bodily from the dead, and that those who believe in Him will also have a bodily resurrection at the end of time. This kind of thinking would have been utter foolishness to the Gentiles! Who would want a resurrected body? Why would that be a desirable thing? And why lift up Jesus as Lord, as the ultimate picture of human wisdom, if He can't even escape His own body?

The message of the cross is foolishness, both to Jew and to Gentile. This is really important to consider. One of the main hypotheses by those who do not believe in God or in the message of the cross is that Jesus died and was buried, and over time, legend began to grow that He had risen from the dead. Either the disciples made it up, or over time it became something that was believed, even though it was not true. **The assumption in this hypothesis is that people in those days were more gullible and would more readily believe that a man could rise from the dead; that if you proclaimed this kind of message, there would be people who would buy it.** But when you understand that the Jews did not believe in the resurrection before the end of time, and the Gentiles believed that the body was corrupt and so a bodily resurrection would not have been desirable, you understand that making up a message, if it were not true, would not have been believed by anyone. And neither would have been willing to buy the notion of a crucified criminal as the one who will determine your eternal destiny.

The message of the cross is a stumbling block to some, and foolishness to others. **Let's go on and spot the other foolish things in this message.** Who are the first eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ? In all the accounts, it is women. Some accounts only mention Mary Magdalene, others mention Mary and Salome as well. In those days, a woman's testimony could not even be included in a court of law. Their testimony was unreliable. When you read Luke's gospel, the women go to tell the disciples that Jesus is no longer in the tomb, and Luke writes in 24:11, "*But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*" In fact, **Celsus**, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek philosopher who wrote against Christianity, wrote that the gospel accounts can't be true because the written accounts are based on the testimony of women, and we all know that women are hysterical. It's foolishness. If you were making up a story, you would never put this in.

And contrast that to how the disciples are portrayed. Think about it. You're trying to promote a movement in which the leaders are men like Peter, James, and John.

Why include the whole section about Peter denying Jesus, turning his back on Him? Why have all the disciples run off in fear? Why have them cowering together while the women are off at the tomb? The story is utter foolishness. If you were making up a story in the wisdom of this world, you would have Peter as the hero, so that future generations would trust in his leadership. You wouldn't have him portrayed as a spineless coward. **The message of the cross, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, is utter foolishness when judged by human wisdom.**

Look back one more time at 1 Corinthians 1. Paul proclaims that not only is this message foolishness, but those who believe in it are foolish too!

<sup>26</sup> *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*  
<sup>27</sup> *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* <sup>28</sup> *He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are,* <sup>29</sup> *so that no one may boast before him.*

God chose the foolish, the weak, the lowly, the despised – the nothings of this world. Amazing. Think about how human wisdom works. The world says if we want to promote our message, we need to target the influencers. We need the politicians, the celebrities, the people in media and advertising. Right? We need to target people in positions of power. That is how the wisdom of the world works. But that is the exact opposite of how God works! God, Paul claims, chooses the foolish things, the weak things, the lowly things, the despised things. He does not work primarily through the rich and powerful, through the influencers, but through the nobodies, the people who are mocked and laughed at and rejected. Throughout the Bible, God routinely chooses the youngest son, the outcast, the foreigner, the moral outcast, and uses them. And he does the same in our world.

Listen again to Celsus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century opponent of Christianity, as quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum*:

*“Their injunctions are like this. ‘Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.’ By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children.”*

God works through the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised. **Consider**

**this interesting feature about Christianity as compared to the other world religions.**

Every other world religion still has its center where the religion began. For example, Islam started in Arabia, at Mecca, and the Middle East is still the center of Islam. Buddhism began in the Far East, as did Hinduism, and those religions are still predominantly Far East religions. The center of Judaism is in Israel. But Christianity's center is always moving. It began in Jerusalem, and then moved to the Hellenistic Gentiles of the Mediterranean world, who were considered to be unclean barbarians. Then the northern European barbarians, the Franks, Anglo-Saxons, and Celts, took hold of it, and the center migrated to northern Europe. And the center stayed there and in North America for a long time. But today, Europe and America are becoming less Christian, while Christianity is exploding in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, growing at 10 times the population growth rate. Now more than 50% of Christians in the world live in the southern hemisphere. Why is that? I believe it's because of what Paul notes here in 1 Corinthians 1. God does not work through power and wealth and status. Whenever Christianity gets mixed with power and wealth and status, the radical message of the cross begins to get lost as it become a weak message of morality and tries to impose its message through the use of power, which can not work. And so the center moves to the oppressed, the weak, and the lowly.

**Again, one of the hypotheses often put out there by those who don't believe in God or the message of the cross is that it was Constantine who was most responsible for the rise of Christianity,** that when he embraced Christianity, it took off around the Roman Empire. That is the wisdom of the world talking, because the assumption is that messages spread through power and influencers. But the reality is that Christianity was spreading through love, sacrifice, and service, growing through weakness and persecution in the early years, and when Constantine embraced it, and when it became eventually the official religion of Roman, it began to lose its power and become a diluted, respectable religion. The message of the cross has been, and always will be, foolishness, and the people God is most likely to use are the foolish, lowly, weak, and despised people of this world.

The message of the cross is foolishness. The message that Jesus died for sinners and rose again from the grave is a foolish one by the world's standards, and it is a message that has been embraced in large part by the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised of the world. What does this mean for us today? Two things I want to leave you with:

**1) Embrace God's offer of salvation by grace**

<sup>28</sup> *He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him*

We boast in those things that we have put our pride in, those things we find our identity in. We boast about our abilities because we have put our identity in them. We boast about our children, or our spouse, or our looks, or even the sports teams we like, because we have placed our pride and identity in them. In this passage, Paul says that the message of the cross has shown us that salvation does not come through those things that we put our identity or pride in. It does not come through our wisdom or our strength, but through weakness and folly.

***Ephesians 2:8-9*** - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

This is good news for those who feel they have nothing to offer, no wisdom or goodness or strength. You just need to receive His offer of salvation by faith. And for those of you with impressive resumes, know that it will not save you or justify you. The message of the cross is that you are so sinful that only the death of the Son of God could save you. But you are so loved, that He willingly died for you.

## 2) Trust in the Lord and not in your own reason and strength

***Proverbs 16:25*** - *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*

Man puts his faith and trust in wisdom and strength. The wisdom of man advocates self-sufficiency, doing it on your own, trusting in yourself. God has shown that through the cross to be not wisdom, but foolishness. The reality is that dependence is wisdom. That is where power is found. As you see Jesus dying for you on the cross and rising again from the grave, you see that God loves you and that you can trust Him. That is where your strength and wisdom comes from, not from following your own reason but from trusting in His will.

***Proverbs 3:5-6*** - *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup> in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Trusting in God means that we proclaim the message of the cross. If it truly is foolish, you will be mocked by some. You may be seen as simple or stupid. And proclaim it through serving others. You may be seen as weak. But the message spreads through loving service and sacrifice, not through power and worldly



influence. We don't need to put our trust in clever marketing or clamor for displays of power. We will instead continue to preach Christ and Him crucified for your salvation from sin and death.

John's gospel ends with John's purpose statement in writing this gospel: *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Do you know God? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you know His forgiveness, His peace, the freedom that is found in knowing Jesus? Do you have life in His name?

**Romans 10:9-10** - *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

Believe this morning that Jesus is the risen Messiah, the Son of God, so that you might have eternal life. If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:

*Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.*