

April Fool

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 20:1-18*

So I want to take you back to a time when you were young – for some of us that stretch of memory is longer than others – and I want you to think of the time when you watched for the first time the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Some of you may have seen it when it first came out in the theater in 1939, but most of us got to see it when it had its annual airing on television. The family gathered in the family room watching it on the old black and white TV – yes, I date myself. But I want you to think about watching this story as a child – and what you felt about Dorothy and Toto and their journey to the Emerald City with the scarecrow, the tin man and the cowardly lion.

All along the yellow brick road this merry band of travelers are picking up signs that the land of Oz was not all peaches and cream. There were lions and tigers and bears, oh my. There were fields of sleep inducing poppies. There were mean apple-throwing trees. There were flying monkeys. (I hated those flying monkeys.) And, of course, there was the wicked witch of the west. So the closer Dorothy got to the Emerald City the more she knew that she was not in Kansas anymore. And then finally she and her gang get what they have been traveling for – they get an audience with the Wizard. Down the long corridor they go and they are brought before the Wizard of Oz – this mean looking 3D hologrammed figure who speaks out of the fire and smoke. And he’s quite terrifying and he has nothing good to say to Dorothy – who just wants to find her way home. And the Wizard can’t be bothered unless of course Dorothy is able to somehow produce for him the flying broom of the wicked witch. And so it is at this point – as the hour glass sands dwindle -- that all appears lost – an uncompassionate wizard, a wicked witch, and a whole kingdom in their clutches. Who

is this pig-tailed girl from Kansas and her bumbling entourage in the face of such wickedness and terror? Now what we don’t know when we first watch this movie (and what Dorothy and gang don’t know) is that the wickedness and terror is not what it appears to be. The green old witch – as nasty as she is – can’t quite get her hands on those ruby slippers, and, on top of it, has a weakness for water – and just a bucketful is enough to melt her to the ground. The mean old wizard is just some old guy behind the curtain who’s pulling a bunch of levers. And at the end of it all – that as bad as Dorothy wanted to go home – she discovers that she’s had the power all along – just click three times those ruby slippers and you are on your way back to Kansas. They had been fooled all along not to see things as they really were. The witch was not as dangerous, the wizard wasn’t a wizard after all and the way to go home was right there on her feet.

Don’t you wonder if one of the reasons why the *Wizard of Oz* remains such a timeless classic is that deep down somewhere not only does it tap into our longing to go home – but maybe, just maybe, it calls into question the way we see our own world. Lord knows – we’ve got lots of things in this world that we have managed to get ourselves afraid of. All sorts of wizards and witches out there that are poised to do us in. Evil forces conspiring to rid us of our hearts, our brains our courage. One half hour with cable news –and you can get pretty convinced that the battle is all but lost.

Like the story I’ve told you before of the man who had come to the end of his rope and couldn’t see anything good in the world -- so he walked out onto the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge and climbed up onto the parapet and was about to leap into the East River when a policeman laid an arresting hand on him and drew him back. The man protested to the policeman, “You don’t understand how miserable my life is and how hopeless the world is. Please, let me jump.”

The kind-hearted officer tried to talk sense into the man and finally said, “I will make you this proposition.

“You know when you play the day for eternity – it puts eternity into the day.”

You take five minutes and give your reasons for why life is not worth living, and then I will take five minutes and give my reasons for why I think life is worth living both for you and for me. If at the end of the ten minutes you still feel liking jumping I will not stop you.”

The man agreed and proceeded to take his five minutes to explain why life was not worth living. The officer then took his five minutes to explain why life was worth living for the both of them. And at the end of the ten minutes the two men joined hands and jumped off the bridge.

The world can fool us – not only to rob us of our hope – but also to make us think that life is in the unrelenting grip of a less than sympathetic power. “That’s just the way the world is,” we say. “Dog eat dog. You got to scratch and claw your way to the top. Only the strong survive. Nice guys finish last. No such thing as a free lunch. Buck up, things could be worse, so I bucked up and things got worse. The wicked witch is in control. The wizard is never going to give us what we want.

And so what do we do? We cower. We play the game by what we think the rules are. We hedge our bets. We fly under the radar. We go into hiding. And assume that the wicked witch is the only game in town. So we play it safe. Or worse – we give up on ourselves. We give up on the real meaning of our lives – because we think that life has to be lived according to the apparent powers that be.

In World War II when Germany marched across Europe and nation after nation fell to its advance – the once free world divided into two camps. There were those who capitulated to the foreign power. The Vichy government in France, for example. Surrendered

themselves to becoming an arm of the invaders. If you can’t beat them, join them. And, on the other hand, there was the resistance. And the resistance lived with this hope that freedom and democracy and goodness and God for that matter still ruled the day. They would not be fooled into thinking that the battle was over.

So on this Easter April Fool’s Day – it’s worth asking – is there the chance we’re getting fooled? That things are not what they appear to be. That life does not have to be lived the way we’ve been told it has be lived? That there is another way to go about life? You know, you stay on the merry go round long enough, to start thinking that the only way to go is in circles.

It makes me think of the story of the American businessman who was standing at the pier of a small coastal village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The American complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The fisherman replied that it only took a little while. The American then asked why didn’t he stay out longer and catch more fish. The fisherman said he had enough to support his family’s immediate needs.

The American then asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?”

The fisherman said, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor.”

The American scoffed. “I am a Wharton MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats. Eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then L.A., and eventually New York City, where you will run your expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But how long will this all take?”

To which the American replied, “Fifteen or 20 years.”

“But what then?”

The American laughed and said, “That’s the best part. When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions.”

“Millions? Then what?”, the fisherman asked.

The American said, “Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your friends.”

Who’s fooling who?

Don’t you wonder on this Easter Sunday – if when Jesus walks out of the tomb and appears to Mary – and she just can’t bring herself to believe that this could be Jesus – don’t you wonder if Jesus is here to say that the wicked witch is dead and the Emerald City is in good hands? Don’t you wonder when we come to terms with the fact that the tomb can’t hold the rabbi from Nazareth – that there is this force at work in the world that has the power to give us back our hearts, our brains and our courage? Don’t you wonder if when we fall at his feet and hear his voice – that we are on the verge of having our eyes opened to see the world not as it appears to be – but as it really is?

Remember Cervantes great character Don Quixote who sets himself to this mission to bring chivalry and gallantry back to the world. And along with his sidekick Sancho Panza they travel the Spanish countryside seeking to rescue the world from its loss of adventure. And when the world wants to give him up as mad he says, “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!”

You see resurrection day is not just a day to remind us that death doesn’t have the last word – resurrection day is the day to tell us that death doesn’t even have the first word. And don’t you wonder sometimes if we don’t too often let death have the first word in our lives? And what I mean by that is living a life of hedged bets. Getting fooled into thinking that the finish line is when you turn 65 or 75 or 95? What would it look like if we lived our lives like we were never going to die? What if this life, in the words of CS Lewis, were just the cover page? What if we were playing for eternity? That we weren’t getting fooled into thinking that life had to be about tomorrow, or next week or next year?

“The tragedy of life is not death,” said Norman Cousins, “but what we let die inside while we live.”

You know when you play the day for eternity – it puts eternity into the day. When you fight the battle knowing the war is already won, you attack the enemy with a greater confidence. So when Jesus says, “Don’t worry about your life and don’t be anxious for tomorrow, – he’s not giving us a bunch of wishful thinking. He’s already gone ahead – and knows the ending. Maybe that’s what Martin Luther King had in mind and made him not worry about that eventual assassin’s bullet. On Wednesday we’ll remember the 50th anniversary of his death – but maybe we’ll remember most is what he kept alive inside him – that the arch of history always bends toward justice.

Remember that great line in Shakespeare’s Henry V at the end of the great battle of Agincourt. King Henry V

surveys the battlefield having fought one of the most valiant battles of England against the French. And a French emissary rides up on his stallion – and Henry does not know how the battle has gone. And he says to the emissary, “How goes the day?” And the emissary replies, “The day is yours.”

It is what Jesus says to us in that garden outside Jerusalem as he walks along the tombs – he says to us, “The day is yours!” The arch of history bends toward resurrection.

What if you lived your life like you were never going to die? What if you lived your life knowing that a handful of water from there --- will melt the wicked old witch? What if you lived your life knowing that the only wizard in town is the one who walks from the tomb and promises to take us home? What if you realized you’re the one wearing the ruby slippers? What if you got your heart back, your brain back and your courage back?

No telling ... no telling ... how good your story’s going to be!



April Fool

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

April 1, 2018



© Church of the Palms

3224 Bee Ridge Rd. Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323