

Amazed and Terrified

Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16:1-8

Please pray with me:

We search for you, O Christ. We come with the women to the tomb this morning. We're not sure why we come, but we come. So like them, we ask that you amaze us, terrify us, startle us out of our pews into our lives, into the world, down the road in pursuit of you. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Well, we made it. We walked through the labyrinth of Holy Week; on Thursday, we sat in the darkened Upper Room to share the Lord's last supper; on Good Friday, we watched and waited from the foot of the cross with the rest of the community of disciples.

Saturday was silent... as we waited through the Jewish Sabbath...and this morning, we come because we cannot stay away. We return to the garden to peer into the tomb to see what we shall see... to catch a glimpse of our beloved Lord's face, please just one more time.

Come along with me as we read the story as Mark tells it, in chapter 16:1-11:

When the Sabbath was over Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us at the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

That's the end of the story. Oh, your Bible provides 12 more verses, but if you like to read footnotes, you've already noticed that the oldest copies of the manuscript end right there, and that the remaining verses, which tie things up very nicely, were added later, by copyists who were probably dissatisfied with the incompleteness of it all. Let's face it, we like a tidy ending. We've watched the whole movie, followed all the plot twists and character developments, and now we want everything sewn up nice and neat. But Mark refuses to satisfy us in this way. In fact, in the original Greek, the last sentence reads like this: *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, afraid because.....* (shrug).....

As Scott Hoezee points out, it's a freeze-frame, with the women in mid-flight, eyes wide with terror, hurtling away from the tomb with arms outstretched and legs pumping and lungs gasping, as Mark snaps a photo and catches the runners in motion.¹

In the story as Mark tells it, from beginning to end, everything's in motion. The gospel moves with a rapid pace, galloping along from activity to encounter to event ... *and Then, and Then, Immediately, and Then...* This gospel ends true to itself, in full stride. We want Mark to slow down a bit, to stop for one moment to explain what's going on. This jet-propelled ending is particularly unsatisfying, after having hung with him for 16 chapters... Why couldn't he have finally paused to pull back the curtain and explain himself? This doesn't answer many of our questions, does it?... No, but it has the ring of truth.

Think about it, if Mark wanted to convince his readers that Jesus indeed had been raised from the dead, he surely could have summoned up a greater pile of proofs and evidence—a more complete narrative to spell it out. But instead, the very fragmented nature of the story, the shadowy confusion of it all, would seem to say that this must have been the way it was... As breathtakingly amazing and terrifying as life itself.

These are the women who witnessed the crucifixion on Friday. According to Mark, the disciples, James and John and Peter and Andrew, were nowhere to be found—but these very same women stood at a distance and watched the whole thing. They must have followed as Joseph of Arimathea claimed the body of Jesus, for they saw where he'd been laid. They waited out the Sabbath, as was required by the law, and then, bearing ointments and oils and linens, as the sun rose, they made their way to prepare their friend for burial. They came to wipe away the blood and the sweat and the tears. To anoint him with scented oils. To wrap him in clean clothes. They came, expecting to prepare for a funeral. What they encountered instead, was this young man telling them to get up, get moving, Jesus was waiting for them. No wonder they were amazed and terrified.

For they discovered, as all disciples of Jesus will discover, that Easter does not end the Gospel of Mark—Easter ends the world as we know it. As we heard from the prophet Isaiah *he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.* And then as the poet said: "...death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die."²

The women went to the tomb, expecting death to have the last word. They went knowing that they had seen Jesus taken down from the cross and laid in the cave and they fully expected that to be the end of the story. They were, in the parlance of grief counselors, embracing closure—not just closure of a relationship with a unique and wondrous messiah, but closure of a dream, closure of a challenge, closure of their call to discipleship. They came ready to say goodbye to all these things.

Yesterday, we celebrated here our witness to the promise of the resurrection truth for Nelda Bucuren, who was laid to rest after 93 years of a very full life. Her son Joe met with me to talk about his mother, and told me how, at the end, as he could see her struggling to breathe, he was able to let go of her and grant her the grace and permission to go... go home to Jesus, home to her beloved husband Glenn. Joe, a man of few but important words, expressed his relief that she was no longer in pain or hobbled by the treachery of her aging body. Joe was able to say what many of us refuse to admit: that in accepting the death of a loved one, there can be a sense of relief. A sense of release from the pain and the struggle and challenge of it all.

I suspect, if this group of women had a chance to tell us themselves, they might be able to admit to their own sense of relief: of being set free from the challenge of following Jesus, from the pain and the struggle and the cost of it all. But instead, they discovered that the challenge was still before them. If Jesus is not dead—if the reign of God is still at hand—then there remains work to be done and risks to be taken, and dangers to be faced. No wonder they were amazed. No wonder they were terrified. No wonder they ran!

And you... Are you amazed and terrified? Let me ask you, when last did you think of Easter with amazement and terror? Come on! It's incongruous to be scared at Easter time. Jeff and I received an greeting card this season, with a rather evil-looking Easter bunny on the front, next to a caption that read "He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake." And inside it read: "Somehow that doesn't sound so creepy when Santa says it." We are so used to thinking of Easter as fluffy bunnies and innocent chicks and pastel eggs and jelly bean binges. But if in fact we are able to truly enter into the Easter story, then we will be amazed and terrified too. If we face the truth of the risen, living Christ—when we hear the invitation to go meet him where he waits for us, it's not something that comes without a healthy dose of fear and trembling, awe and wonder, terror and amazement. And so it should be.... because you know, when we truly face the truth of the risen, living Christ, hear his call to us, we know that we can never be the same again. We know that we shall all be changed... We know ... we know... that rebirth will bring discovery and challenge and the sloughing off of old skin into the emergence of a new creation and we are fascinated and spellbound by its promise—amazed! Even as we are shaken and disturbed by its claim upon our lives—terrified! And so it should be.

For it's not over... in Jesus Christ, death is simply not the end of the story. On the contrary, we're not at the ending, we're just getting started. That's the truth of the resurrection. The young man in the white robe says simply, He's not here. Go tell his disciples. And who are his disciples? Peter and James and John and Andrew... and Mike and Steve and Helene and Pat and Debbie and Nancy and Paul and Kay and Don and Glen and Gladys... you are his disciples.

And what is the message? Jesus will meet you in Galilee. Where is Galilee? Well, it's home to these women, it's where they come from. It's the everyday, ordinary stuff of their lives. It's the workplace and the marketplace and the kitchen table and the classroom. It's where we live out our daily routine—where we live and work, make love and play. Jesus goes before us to the heart of our existence and promises to meet us there.

Tom Long offers one more intriguing suggestion³. He says Galilee is where it all started in Mark chapter one, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." (Mk. 1:14) In other words, the story isn't over. Leave the empty tomb now and go back, and read it again. Like the other disciples, you did not understand the story the first time through. Now that you have been to the cross, now that you have wept in the cemetery, now that you've encountered the empty tomb, go back to the beginning and read it again. Go back to recognize that the stories of the lame who can now walk, the blind with sight restored, the deaf who can now hear, the political and religious institutions exposed, this is the story of God at work in the world. These are the resurrection appearances. This is not the end—it's the beginning.

Easter is the story where terror and amazement are appropriate responses, where the kingdom of God is at hand, where we are called, not to sit and grieve, but to rise up and finish the story for ourselves. For Jesus Christ has gone before us and calls us to follow... So go, get moving, it's your turn now. And do not be afraid, because...

¹ Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php?pNav=cep>. Cited 4-11-09

² John Donne, *Death be Not Proud*, 1610.

³ Long, Thomas G., "Preaching Easter from the Gospel of Mark," *Journal for Preachers*, 2003.