

Sunday, April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

The Astonishing Wonder

Mark 16:1-8

INTRODUCTION:

Our Easter reading today is from the Gospel of Mark. At the time of its writing, many scholars agree, that Mark may have been writing his account about the life and times of Jesus to prepare his readers for the suffering they were about to endure at the hands of the Roman Empire. Both explicit and veiled, the themes of suffering and steadfast discipleship weave through this Gospel with stark urgency.

Mark moves quickly from one episode in Jesus' ministry to another, often using the adverb "immediately". The book as a whole is characterized as "the beginning of the good news". The life, death and resurrection of Christ comprise only the "beginning," of which we continue to practice even to this day, two thousand years later!

The message is still urgent, still relevant, still *Good News*. This is the astonishing hope God offers to all who suffer... In the end, Love always wins.

This is the Good News written in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 16...

SCRIPTURE:

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 from 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 are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 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.

Please pray with me.

God of surprise and mystery, awe and majesty, come close to us this morning. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our ROCK and our REDEEMER. - Amen

Have you ever noticed that **whenever** an angel of the Lord appears in the Bible and says, “Don’t be afraid” or “do not be alarmed”, it is without a doubt the time when you absolutely should be afraid? Imagine for instance, you are in deep mourning, unsettled and distressed beyond sleep. In the early dawn, you walk over to Sleepy Hollow and find your way to the still fresh gravesite of your lost beloved. As you approach the site you find it dug up and empty. **That** is pretty much *THE* time to be afraid!

And they were! The scripture reads, *“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 young angel, dressed in his dazzling white Easter robe was not very helpful. But something else is going on here along side of fright. The women were seized with terror and also amazement!

In my experience there is a fine line between terror and amazement. I think that fine line is what adrenaline junkies like me actually chase. It has occurred to me that it is quite likely Mary Magdalene was like that too, but maybe I’m just projecting. In any case, terror mingles with amazement in that moment when you are quite certain that danger is very close yet there is a magnetic pull to walk directly into the astonishment that can only be found on that knife-edge. My friend Ken just sent me some photos he took in the Arctic Circle last week. He was standing on this frozen tundra less than 100 yards away from 3 polar bears, the only species known that will actually hunt human beings. In the photo, all three of these massive and beautiful creatures are staring directly at Ken! I’m sure that at that moment; Ken was seized with terror, yet amazement kept him in place with his lens focused on these awesome creatures. In moments like this your mind is thrown out of its normal state. The reality of what’s happening is both terrifying and awesome. Your brain clicks into overdrive trying to process it.

The very idea of the resurrection of the body was every bit as hard to believe for Mary as it is for anyone of us today. The difference is she was standing on that knife-edge, staring at the empty tomb and somehow, this mind-warping cognitive dissidence needed to be resolved. Fear and wonderment demand resolution or you will go insane. Most of us in modernity read this story with the kind of distance a photograph brings. It’s compelling and interesting but from our safe

distance, skepticism often wins over awe. We can't make any logical sense out of it. Reason holds us back from embracing the wonder.

It's easy to be skeptical reading about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Many of us quickly file the story into the mythology section; a lovely metaphor perhaps, but actual bodies rising up from the dead can hardly be literal. To fully believe that God became flesh, willingly submitted to his own painful execution at the hands of hate and then rose again to defeat death is not only a-rational, it tips into the insane! We crave verifiable proof, tangible evidence and repeatable, consistent results. And wrestling out a resolution to this this mind-warping cognitive dissidence causes us to run toward the safety of our experience.

But here is the problem that comes in the spiritual realm between life and death, mystery and rationality; this Gospel will never conform to our easily reasoned, consistently logical and tidy provable equations. I'm not at all saying that Christianity is anti-intellectual. None of us should ever check our minds at the door of the church. But here's the thing, the God of the Bible will never be contained in the confines of the scientifically predictable or philosophically understandable. Human beings just naturally want to do that rather than live in the astonishing wonder of a terrifyingly big God that is far beyond our desire for logic, order and certainty. Seeking to domesticate God into our limited realm we back away from the terrifying knife-edge of the unknowing and dismiss our amazement in exchange for safety and comfort. But, to know the God of resurrection is to know that God will never be domesticated. I know that's frustrating and uncomfortable but the God of the Bible is uncontainable and will never be tamed. This is a wild, unpredictable God, like a whipping wind or the raging ocean. God refuses to be boxed in to our rational constructs or organized neatly into religious theologies. Instead, God chooses to reveal the astonishing wonder of the Divine in things as simple and ephemeral as the first warm day of spring, the exquisite taste of great food, the laughter among friends, the intimacy of lovers. Beauty, happiness, and love can never be codified, rationally explained or fully understood. The majesty of this God is found in the mysterious, mundane ordinary everyday life. Jesus said take, eat this bread, this is my body breaking for you, drink, this is the cup of forgiveness, love one another, take care of one another and see that the kingdom of God is at hand, right in front of your nose.

When God chose to take on a body and walk with us here on earth he consecrated all of our human experience as holy and acceptable. He told us that to begin to understand the mystical heavenly things we must first lean to see transcendence in the earthly things, to behold the astonishing wonder of a crocus blooming or the majesty of a symphony climaxing or the smell of bread baking. God gave us

amazingly complex physical bodies that are vessels to hold this spiritual journey on earth. The Gospel won't ever be demystified through intellect and reasoning alone, we will only glimpse a slice of heaven through the mysterious lens of love.

And this is what Easter is, a love that denies even the grave, a love where science mingles happily with mystery and paradox dances with the rational and life emerges glorified through death. Resurrection means hope beyond what we can possibly imagine or prove. It means that God has showed us the way love will always win in the end and all we need do is surrender our whole selves into the astonishing wonder with holy terror and amazement.