

“Be Neither Amazed Nor Unafraid”

Mark 16:1-8

Nick Wilson

I don't know about you but when holidays like Easter roll around, it's easy for me to just go through the motions. It's Easter Sunday. You wake up, get ready, get your kids ready and try to herd everyone out the door sometime before church starts. Everyone sits through the service, goes home, eats some ham and a chocolate Easter bunny, maybe spend time with extended family and you call it a day.

This is what's expected, it's just part of the deal. I find that, unless I'm intentional, Easter passes by just like any other Sunday. This morning I don't want any of us to let this day 'pass by.' I don't want any of us to get caught up in what's expected.

I want us to encounter the unexpected this morning. I want us to be struck, like the woman in this passage, by the weight of an empty tomb.

But I don't want us to be amazed by this empty tomb; neither do I want us to be unafraid.

<Read Mark 16:1-5>

Jesus was laid to rest Friday evening by Joseph of Arimethea. Verse 47 of chapter 15 tells us the Mary Magdalene was with Joseph when they laid Jesus in the tomb. Mark goes out of his way to tell us that she was “looking on to see where he was laid.”

This is significant because when she would return to the tomb, she was expecting to find Jesus where she last saw him. And who wouldn't expect to find a dead person where you last left him?

So there she was, back at the burial with another Mary ready to anoint him. This was a costly process that honored the dead by perfuming the body. These women loved Jesus and were loyal to him, even to very end. Unfortunately this much cannot be said of Jesus' male disciples.

As they approached the tomb, they remembered that there was a significant obstacle in their way – a large stone (4-6 feet in diameter, weighing several hundred pounds). These stones were used to seal off tombs to protect them from animals and thieves. It usually took several men to slide a stone like this one in place. These women would need help if they wanted to get to Jesus' body.

But they looked up and saw the stone was rolled away! “Ok, this is weird. What's going on here?” This wasn't exactly what they were expecting.

They enter the tomb, but instead of finding Jesus' body they meet a 'young man in a white robe.' Mark doesn't tell us anything more about the identity of this young man, but if there's anything we've learned about Mark's writing style – it's that he loves subtlety. The detail about white robes is likely an indicator that this was an angelic figure. The other gospels corroborate this conclusion. Who else would be hanging out in a tomb at dawn on the first day of the week?

The word I want to focus upon is the word “amazed.”

The reason why it's so important is because Mark uses it several other times earlier in his gospel. With it he describes the emotional response of the crowds or Jesus' disciples when encountering the miracles of Jesus. Amazement isn't always fitting response, however. The word carries with it the idea of confusion and bewilderment rather than an expression of genuine faith.¹

The woman at the tomb this morning were amazed – and for good reason. Why wouldn't they be confused and emotional? There's an angelic figure sitting where Jesus' body should be. What's going on?

Well, they should have known exactly what was going on.

Take a look at the young man's response in verses 6-7:

- 6 And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, *here is* the place where they laid Him.
- 7 "But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.' "

Look back at Mark 14:28:

- 28 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

¹ BDAG, 303a.

Jesus foretells his death and resurrection three times in Mark's gospel!² An empty tomb should not be surprising at this point. Despite Jesus' clear teachings, his followers saw Jesus' death as the end of any future hope in his ministry. I guess you could say they were dead wrong.

So how does the angel respond to the amazement of these women?

"Don't be amazed"

Before we can either be amazed or not amazed by an empty tomb, we need to first believe that the tomb is, in fact, empty.

The authors of the NT believed that the tomb was empty but I realize that, for some of you, Scripture isn't a compelling witness. I am very aware that I cannot convince anyone of the historicity of the resurrection. What I can do is offer four pieces of evidence that, I think, supports the testimony of the Gospels.

1. Dialog with Trypho (2nd century AD)³
 - a. Jewish leaders accused the disciples of taking Jesus' body to deceive others in thinking that Jesus rose bodily and ascended into heaven
2. Josephus Flavius (Antiquities of the Jews, 94 AD)⁴

² Mark 8:31-32, 9:30-32, 10:32-34

³ Justin, *Dialog with Trypho*, 108.

⁴ Arabic summary, presumably of Antiquities 18.63. From Agapios' Kitab al-'Unwan ("Book of the Title," 10th c.)

3. Women found the empty tomb (embarrassment test)⁵
4. The disciples risked their lives, and died for a lie they started?

The testimony of the disciples should not be so quickly discounted. The tomb is empty. But be not amazed.

Trinity, don't be amazed at an empty tomb this morning. Don't be surprised or bewildered. This was part of the plan.

What plan?

Man was created to be in fellowship with God, glorifying and enjoying him forever. This fellowship was broken by sin (a failure to glorify God as we ought). The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And that "the wages of sin is death."

Bottom line: we don't glorify God as we ought and that means we're guilty of sin. Since God is holy, he cannot tolerate sin. What we (everyone of us) earn from our sin is death. We are unrighteous and so we deserve death – eternal separation from God in Hell.

God does not owe us anything more than this. If the story stopped there, God would still be holy and completely just. But God is rich in mercy!

Long before Jesus was on the scene, God told his people in Isaiah 53:11:

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities* IV. viii. 15

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see *it and* be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.

Did you catch that? <Read last two lines>

God will send his servant, the Righteous One to "justify the many," and "bear their iniquities (sins)"

Enter Jesus: The perfect, sinless, righteous, servant, Son of God.

On the cross, Jesus dies the death we deserve and in exchange, we receive a righteousness we could never earn. He gets our punishment; we get *his* righteousness.

So why the resurrection? <Romans 4:25>

25 *He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Jesus died for our sins and was raised so that we could be approved of by God. The resurrection signifies God's acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice.⁶ There's no more guilt and punishment for sin. If death is the punishment for sin, and sin is atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus, death is dead!

If Jesus stayed dead, we would never know if the punishment for sin had really been taken care of.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 615.

Thank God for an empty tomb and a risen Christ! Friends, the punishment for sin has been accepted by God in Christ!

This morning the punishment for YOUR sin rests in one of two places: either as a ticking time bomb around your neck OR completely neutralized, detonated on the cross. It is my earnest desire that today you would turn from your sin, laying your rebellion to rest in an empty tomb. Yield to him, trusting only in the death and resurrection of Jesus as your approval before a holy God.

Behold: an empty tomb. Be not amazed, Trinity. He is risen, just as he told you.

No, we should not be amazed at an empty tomb, but we are not to be unafraid by an empty tomb either.

8 They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Maybe some of us are tempted to read this verse and roll our eyes thinking, “this is good news, what do they need to be afraid of?” We know silence and fear wasn’t the last word for these women, but it was their first.⁷ The truth is, fear is the only fitting response to an empty tomb and news of Jesus’ resurrection. Fear is the only fitting response to any direct revelation of God’s divine activity.

⁷ Luke 24:10; Matt. 28:8

Five other times in this gospel followers respond to Jesus’ miraculous power and authority with fear (Mark 4:40; 5:15, 33; 6:50. I will talk about just one. Mark 9:6

- After Jesus calms the storm: “They became very much afraid and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (Mark 4:40)
- After crowds heard that Jesus cast out a legion of demons from a man they, “became frightened” and “implored him to leave their region” (Mark 5:15)
- After a woman was healed she began “fearing and trembling, aware of what happened to her” (Mark 5:33)
- After Jesus appeared to his disciples walking on the water, “they all saw him and were terrified” (Mark 6:50)
- And finally, Mark 9...

2 Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them...

Jesus takes his closest disciples up a mountain where God reveals to them Jesus true glory. This was the transfiguration. How does Peter respond? Verse 6 says, “for he did not know how to answer; for they became terrified.”

Witnessing the awesome power and glory of God has but one proper response: fear.

Unfortunately, too many of us do not have a proper fear of God. Too many of us are unafraid of the resurrection.

It's the reason why we are bored with Easter.

Imagine that you're climbing a great mountain. You see a storm brewing above you. Do you continue your trek unfazed? Do you pretend it's not there and go on with your life? Of course not! Mountain climates are traitorous and volatile. You're very life now hangs in on a single thread: whether you will be able to find shelter in time.

Our God is infinitely greater than the greatest mountain. His wrath and power are infinitely more terrible than the worst storm on the highest peak.

The great news is that there is a cave in the mountain. There is a refuge from the storm. And its name is Jesus Christ. The mountain that was once a source of terror and dread has become our joy and delight as we shake in awesome reverence at its provision and strength within the cave.

The power that was once against us is now working for our good. But this does not mean we are unafraid.

Consider Paul's exhortation, "work out our salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is *at work* in you, both to will and to work *for* his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12).

In Christ, the fear of God works FOR us, not against us, so that we will and work for his good pleasure.⁸

Some of you aren't that interested in willing or working for God's good pleasure. Do you know what that means? It means you don't fear God. And if you are not interested in fearing God, it's because you haven't found the cave in the mountain; it's because you don't see the storm.

Some of you remain unafraid of God. This isn't safe. Beware, the awesome wrath and power of God is brewing against you. Do not wait. Do not mock him. Do not run from him. There is far to fall on a mountain precipice 15,000 feet in the air. Run to him. Run into the mountain cave of Christ and be saved.

Franklin D. Roosevelt coined the phrase, "the only thing to fear is fear itself." That sounds nice, but it's not true. The only thing to fear is the Lord.

Others of you believe that your problem is that you are totally paralyzed by fear. Maybe you are thinking, "how can fear possibly be a good thing when I feel like I am being crushed by it?" You are constantly anxious about your financial situation. You are afraid of what your friends, coworkers and family members think of you. You worry day and night about your medical condition, how your kids will turn out, or the future of your marriage.

⁸ John Piper, "The Goodness of God and the Fear of God," <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-goodness-of-god-and-the-fear-of-god>

The problem, brother, sister, is NOT that you fear too much but that you far fear too little. The problem is NOT that you fear too many things, but that you do not fear the one thing that ought to be feared.

Anxiety is not, first, a medical condition. It is first a heart condition.

When we fear lesser things, when people-pleasing, money-hoarding, fame-seeking, people-fearing, power-grabbing, or self-serving creep in and begin to characterize our lives, we cannot see God as the majestic mountain he is. He becomes flat and tame. At the same time we construct our own, man-made mountains and tremble at their feet. For some of you, God is flatter than your cornfield. This ought not be!

The great news is that he is not a cornfield. He's a mountain – and what a mighty, terrible mountain his is!

If you are struggling, trembling at lesser mountains, gain perspective. Turn to the mountain of God and, from the vantage point of the cave of Christ, see how tiny those other fears really are. Only then are we free to follow God in faithful obedience. Only then can we “work out your salvation with fear and great trembling.”

The awesome power of God on display in an empty tomb, witnessed by two women two thousand years ago is the same power either working for you or against you this morning.

It is my hope and prayer that you will leave today and not be amazed: that you would know and love God's glorious plan for salvation through the resurrection of his Son. It is also my hope that you will not leave today unafraid.

Like the Marys in Mark 16, being gripped by fear is a perfectly fitting response to the power of God in an empty tomb. I hope you find yourself gripped by fear; I do not, however, want you to stay trembling at the terror of the Lord working against you. Rather, tremble in fear at the awesome might of the Lord working FOR you in the cave of Christ.

²³ The fear of the LORD leads to life,
and whoever has it rests satisfied;
he will not be visited by harm (Prov. 12:23)