

AMAZING BUT TRUE

a sermon based on Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16:1-8

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EASTER SUNDAY

Imagine if you will, that you have gone with Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome to the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. They have brought spices along to anoint the body to offset the smell of putrefaction. After all, Jesus was a real human being, not a figment of someone's imagination. On the way to the tomb, they wonder who will help them move the stone from the grave. But, when they get there, they see the stone is already rolled away. They looked inside for Jesus' body, but what they found instead was "a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. Pointing to the place where Jesus' body had lain, the young man told them that the man they were looking for, Jesus of Nazareth, had been raised from the dead and then he told them to go tell the disciples and Peter."

So, what did they do? We are told, "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."

Let's talk about terror. The women did not know what to think. They had been told that Jesus was buried in this particular burial cave. The fact that they did not go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the grave tells us just how **terrified** they were. You see, if the Roman authorities found out the women were telling people that Jesus had risen from the dead they would have hunted the women down and executed them for spreading rumors that would encourage the followers of Jesus to continue his so-called treasonous activities.

Isaiah prophesied that God would “destroy the shroud, (the cloth that covers a dead body) 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 the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. [Isaiah 25:7-8]

Isaiah was saying that the shroud over the people was the sentence of death the people had pronounced on themselves by abandoning God. They didn't want to think about dying much less whether or not God would or could take the shroud of death off of them.

Let me ask you again, if it were you who had come to the tomb, looking for Jesus and found it empty, how do you think you might have reacted? Would you have been, like the women in Mark's account, seized with terror and amazement? And would you have run away, telling no one what you saw or experienced? Perhaps you'd wonder if anyone would believe you? Death is so final, so absolute. The mere *thought* of death terrifies most people. Most people don't think about being raised from the dead because they don't want to deal with the fact that they will one day die. I have a story.

It was Easter Day, 1973. Uganda groaned under the terror of Idi Amin. Still fresh in young Pastor Kefa Sempangi's memory was a face burned beyond recognition, the sight of soldiers cruelly beating a man, and the horrible sound of boots crushing bones. All for the crime of being Christian. But that Easter of 1973 Sempangi bravely and openly preached on the risen Lord in his town's football stadium to over 7,000 people. After the service, five of Idi Amin's Secret Police followed Sempangi back to his little church and closed the door behind them. Five rifles pointed at Sempangi's face.

"We are going to kill you for disobeying Amin's orders" said the captain. "If you have something to say, say it before you die." Sempangi, thinking of his beautiful

wife and lovely little girl, began to shake. But the risen Lord living in his heart gave him the courage to speak. "Do what you must," he said. "The Word of God says that in Christ I am already dead, and that my real life is hidden with Him in God. It is not my life that is in danger, but yours. I am alive in the risen Lord but you are still dead in your sins. May He spare you from eternal destruction."

The leader looked at Sempangi for a long time. Then he lowered his gun and said, "Will you pray for us?" Sempangi did, and from that day those five officers, now converted through the witness of Sempangi's bravery, protected the pastor with their very lives. At that moment when the soldiers threatened to kill Sempangi, like the women at the tomb, he may have been filled with terror but he was also filled with **amazement** and it was this that gave him the courage to face his executioners and proclaim his faith in the risen Lord.

So, let's talk about **amazement**. Many people who scoff at the idea of the resurrection are trapped in a world of rationality and reason. The problem is we know too much. The resurrection defies all logic. Indeed, many have lost their sense of wonder, their capacity for amazement. I have a story.

It's about a school teacher who was assigned to tutor children in a large city hospital. One day, she received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child.

The teacher took the boy's name and room number, and was told by the teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher was outside the boy's room that she realized that she was standing in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her for what she would find: a young boy horribly burned and in great pain.

The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. So she managed to

stammer, “I’m the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs.” This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled her way through the English lesson, even though she questioned whether he would survive to have another lesson. It seemed to her that it was a meaningless exercise.

She returned the next morning and as she passed the nursing station, the head nurse of the burn unit asked her, “What did you do to that boy?” Assuming the worst, she started apologizing but the nurse interrupted her: “You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live.”

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until she came to visit him and help him with his homework. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy said: “They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?”

The key to grasping the resurrection is our capacity for amazement.

It is likely that the mere thought that Jesus was raised from the dead was more than the women at the tomb could comprehend. They may have wondered if the young man dressed in white and sitting in the tomb was a heavenly messenger or a ghost? How could they tell if the messenger was telling the truth? Perhaps the Romans had taken Jesus' body and thrown it on some dung heap outside the city walls. How could they know what really happened? All they knew was that Jesus' body had been taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb and now it wasn't there. Not knowing what to do, “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.”

Of course, we know that eventually **amazement** overcame terror. The disciples

encountered the resurrected Christ and eventually they went out to tell others that Jesus rose from the grave and so shall we.

In the early nineties the ABC news show 20/20 had an interesting segment on the shroud of Turin, which was claimed to be the shroud, the burial cloth that Jesus was buried in. This cloth is believed to bear an imprint of the person of Jesus, put there by the radiation of intense light that accompanied that life returned to his body. It is now housed in a cathedral in Turin, Italy. I will admit that I was fascinated by the shroud and, although I did not believe it to be authentic, I was rather excited by the possibility. Not far from my home where I grew up there were three relic chapels and all three displayed what were claimed to be splinters of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Even as a young child, I had put no credence in those relic chapels. So, I was surprised by the fact that I was so intrigued by the Shroud of Turin. I realized that I wanted it to be genuine. This is perhaps it might offer irrefutable evidence for the resurrection.

So, when an international team of scientists, consisting of Christians, Jews, Moslems, and non-believers, set about to prove or disprove the story behind this ancient cloth, I was intensely interested in their findings. The results of their inquiry were published in an issue of National Geographic magazine.

The interesting thing to me about the 20/20 story was an interview that they had with one of the scientists, an Air Force colonel who was a specialist in laser technology. He openly admitted that he began the project not only as a non-Christian, but as a person who was openly anti-religious. He said that he relished the opportunity, and I quote, “ to debunk what I considered a childish myth.” The team of scientists had determined that carbon dating of the Shroud of Turin placed it in a time at least six hundred years after the time of Christ. Heraldo Rivera asked him, “Now that you have spent four years on this project what is your response.” And his response was inconsistent with the findings of the scientific research.

In fact, his response is very much like the **amazement** that seized the women who

ran from the tomb. The Air Force Colonel told Herald, “After four years on this project, I now fall upon my knees and worship a resurrected Christ.”

It doesn't make sense. The Shroud is not authentic but in the process of analyzing and inspecting it, this skeptic, this non-religious and avowedly disbelieving scientist found that he needed something more than scientific proof. He needed to know that life is more than a combination of chemicals and synapses encased in a body. He moved beyond mathematical formulas and scientific theories into the realm of **amazement** where God was able to break through his defenses and lead him to the essence of life, his very soul.

Likewise, the disciples were overwhelmed by amazement so that God was able, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to break through their defenses and lead them to the essence of life, their very souls. It's **amazing but true**: God does have power over life and death!

How about you? Will you open yourself to the possibility of the impossible so that God is able to break through your defenses and **AMAZE** you? Will you allow Jesus' resurrection to lead you to the essence of life, to the depths of your very soul? God has already lifted the shroud of death from you. All you need to do is accept God's gift of unconditional love as revealed in Jesus the Christ and God will do the rest. .

Amazing but true: **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**

And let the people say, “Amen.”