

## **Confronted by New Life: “Perplexed, Terrified, and Amazed”**

*A Sermon on Luke 24:1-12*

“Christ is Risen!” – “He is Risen Indeed.” Alleluia. After the experience of Jesus’ confrontation with death on Good Friday, and the time of waiting with his body in the tomb throughout Holy Saturday, we find ourselves here today on Easter Sunday with words of victory on our lips. We’ve sung songs of praise and “Gloria” declaring Jesus’ resurrection, we’ve spoken of the “Strife” being over, and we’ve declared that love has come *through* death to bring new life. These words of victory, these resurrection words, have been drawn out of us as we are confronted by the reality of new life today. Words of Christ’s victory are good words for us to speak today in a world of weary souls that long for new life bursting through the death dealing powers that get so much airtime and fill up so much of our headspace.

And yet, as I meditated on the scripture for this morning, I was struck by the fact that the Easter songs of victory – the songs that Christians throughout the ages would go on to sing with such confidence - were still in these passages only like little seeds just beginning to sprout – or perhaps sticking with the music metaphor, they were like the peak of a composition that had only just begun to be written. Instead of the confident solos of “Gloria” and harmonies declaring that the “Strife was Over,” Luke tells us that the resurrection choruses began with different, less confident, words. The resurrection song began as the women and the apostles found themselves “perplexed, terrified, and amazed” (repeat). On the face of it, these words could almost seem more appropriate to the events of Good Friday with its minor notes and haunting harmonies. Were we not perplexed, terrified, and even amazed as we journeyed with Jesus to his confrontation with death on the cross? As we read the scripture from Luke 24 though, I believe that we find, friends, that these three words, “perplexed, terrified, and amazed,” are indeed Easter

Sunday words. While they may not yet be the confident “Alleluia’s” and “Gloria’s,” they are nonetheless words that speak to the experience of being confronted by the surprising, unexpected reality of God bringing new life in the face of the reality of death. We would do well to spend some time this morning digging into these three words, then, as we seek to attune our hearing to the first notes of the resurrection choruses within them.

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, Luke says, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. I am moved by the act of love performed by these women who Luke tells us later in the passage included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, among others. In their grief and pain, they prepared spices and ointments for Jesus’ body. They loved him and they were going to show their love for him by caring for his body in death as they had in life. Crucifixion – the way Jesus had been killed - was a form of political theatre meant to humiliate and intimidate not only the one being crucified, but also those loved ones watching so that they might scatter in fear. These women, Luke tells us, did not let humiliation and intimidation stop them from preparing to care for and love Jesus, even in death. And it was this act of love that placed them in just the right place to be confronted by the surprising, unexpected reality of new life. Here already, before we get to the first of our three words today, there is an Easter lesson for us: exercise love and care in the midst of death, for it is in the spaces of our weakness that God is strong.

The women knew the way, and so they were able to chart a course to the tomb that morning. They had seen, observed with their own eyes, the compassion of Joseph of Arimathea as he laid Jesus’ body in the tomb after the crucifixion. They *expected* to find Jesus’ body lying there. This is what death does, after all – it stops life in its tracks. But what these women would see when they arrived would upset their expectations: Jesus’ body wasn’t there. Luke says that

when they did not see a body they were “perplexed” – there’s our first word. The Greek word Luke uses and that we translate “perplexed” literally means being at an impasse, unable to proceed.<sup>1</sup> They had known the path to get there that morning, but where were they to go now? They knew what they came seeking, but they had not found it.

Let’s dwell on this word “perplexed” for a while. The fact that Luke tells us that the women were perplexed at Jesus’ missing body might seem like simple description. Knowing that Luke wrote this word down for later disciples of Jesus to read, however, we might interpret this word to be a sign of a deeper spiritual dynamic at the heart of the life of faith for all believers. Perhaps Luke wants us to consider how being perplexed in the face of God’s act of bringing new life should, in every age, be a common dynamic of Christian faith. Do we walk on life’s paths expecting God to move and act within our lives in *merely* predictable ways? When we encounter something perplexing in the life of faith, do we seek to smooth it over with certainties, or do we dwell together in that perplexing space, ready to encounter God there too? Perhaps Luke wants us to consider how being confronted by the God of resurrection will lead us again and again to moments where we go, “Huh?,” moments where our expectations are upset and where surprises become anticipated. Let’s try that together. On the count of three, try your best confused look, and look at each other and say, “Huh?”

I wonder how long the women stood in that perplexed state? Was it mere seconds? Minutes? Longer? Luke doesn’t tell us exactly but simply says that while the women were still perplexed, “suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them” and that they were “terrified” – there’s our second word. Literally, the word means “full of fear.” They were full of fear and they “bowed their faces to the ground.” To help us connect with these women in this

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<sup>1</sup> *Aporeo* from which we get the word “Aporia” to describe a problem we can’t seem to solve.

moment, I invite you to touch the ground or to take a moment to feel the ground beneath your feet or close your eyes and think of your face touching the ground [PAUSE for action]. Angelic encounters mentioned throughout the Bible often struck fear into people and caused them to bow low in awe, which is why the first words spoken by Angels were often: “Do not be afraid.” Despite inducing fear at the outset, Angelic encounters never kept people there, however. Rather, those encounters became transformative moments of transition in people’s lives. Following an angelic visitation, the addressee rarely ever was left the same or left on the same path. And indeed, things were no different for the women in our scripture from Luke for today.

I tend to think that Luke wanted us to see the transformative moment of transition for the women at the tomb that day as a transition from a state of forgetfulness to a state of active remembrance. The angels begin addressing the women with a question: “why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” Did the women, faces pressed against the soil in fear, begin to look up at that moment? Did they move through their fear and awe to the beginnings of new recognition in these words of the angels? The next words of the Angels, expressed in the imperative mood, move the women out of their terrified state to a new state of freedom and movement: “Remember,” the angels said to them, “how Jesus had told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Did the mention of Jesus’ name and the memory of his ministry in Galilee lift them from the ground? Luke says it was after this question posed by the angels that the women indeed “remembered Jesus’ words.” They remembered how he had promised that the powers of death would not ultimately win out.

What had kept them, I wonder, from remembering Jesus’ words prior to this moment? After all, Jesus had been showing them the life that overcomes death throughout his ministry in

Galilee. He had been showing it to them and to others in every healing, and in every teaching that confronted them with the possibility of changing their minds and following him. Jesus' ministry was itself life overcoming death again and again. Maybe it was a different form of terror and fear that had kept them from remembering this before – the terror and fear of the powers that put people like Jesus on crosses. Maybe the fear they felt in their encounter with the angels was more like awe, an awe that allowed them to snap out of the immobilizing fear caused by the powers of death. Can the word “terrified” be for us a sign, then, of a deeper spiritual dynamic at the heart of the life of our faith too? Perhaps Luke wants us to consider how being confronted by the God of resurrection will invite us to let go of the terror and fear that the powers of the world would have us carry in order to embrace the holy awe that accompanies transformative moments of transition into new life. In our moment of awe, can we hear the Angel's admonition to us: “Remember his words....,” and find ourselves also propelled forward in life?

Luke says that it was after remembering Jesus' words that the women returned to the Apostles to tell them everything that had happened. While the women had heeded the Angels' instructions to remember Jesus' words and that had propelled them forward, the Apostles didn't seem ready to believe – at least not at first. Their first response was to call the women's report “idle talk” or an “idle tale” – a part of the story illustrated powerfully on the bulletin cover with the man shushing the women who are bursting through the door with the news. Perhaps the Apostles too were still captivated by the terror and fear of the powers that put Jesus on the cross to truly hear the women's report. Something stirred in Peter, however, and Luke says he ran to the tomb to look and he stooped to look in. While we are not going to run in imitation of Peter this morning, perhaps we too can move our head in a motion simulating “stooping” to look into the tomb [STOOP]. I am struck by Peter's running and his stooping to look. In my mind, if Peter

was doubting like the other apostles and merely entertaining the women's report, he might have slowly sauntered to the tomb. But he ran. Perhaps he was beginning to let the possibility of new life take root in his heart too. And when he got there, he saw what the women had seen – no body, only linen cloths. Luke says Peter was “amazed” - there's our third word - and he marveled at what happened. I wonder if the amazement he felt reminded him of the feeling he had had countless times throughout Jesus' ministry when he had been amazed at what he witnessed God do in Jesus. Maybe Peter saw the connection between the ministry of Jesus and the empty tomb he was peering into. Might Peter's amazement remind us of the life of faith? Of how often we move back and forth between doubt and amazement – how sometimes we find ourselves amazed at God's goodness and then how we sometimes forget that God's life-giving presence is at work at all until we have someone remind us that God continues to work, even in the midst of our despair?

Friends, the perplexing, terrifying, and amazing journey of the women and Peter this morning have laid the groundwork for the first notes of the resurrection choruses for us. They have reminded us that the songs of victory we sing today can never be triumphalist anthems of the self-assured, but instead songs of faith in the power that “belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). As we sing our hymn of response, “Christ is Alive, Let Christians Sing,” let us do so, then, while trying to embody in our song some of the surprise and unexpected amazement that comes with God's act of new life in Jesus' resurrection. For in this song we confess by faith, that in every insult, rift, and war, where color, scorn, or wealth divide, Christ suffers still, yet loves the more, and lives, where even hope has died.” Alleluia.

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## **Communion [Wireless Mic]**

It is appropriate, this Easter morning, that we break bread and share the cup of fellowship together in my memory of Jesus. After all, the very next story that appears in the Gospel of Luke 24 following the perplexing, terrifying, and amazing encounters experienced by the women and Peter on Easter morning, is a story about two disciples who come to a dramatic moment of recognizing the risen Jesus as he broke bread together with them. These two disciples had been walking down the road to Emmaus on Easter morning, discussing everything that had happened with Jesus – his life and death, as well as the amazing reports from the women about his tomb being empty. As they walked, they met a man who they thought was a stranger but who was actually Jesus. They couldn't recognize him, however, at least not until they invited him into their house to break bread together.

Imagine the scene [move to break bread] – these disciples were sitting around the table with Jesus, and he picked up the bread, broke it, and blessed God for it and then took a cup and poured it out and gave it to them to divide among themselves. I imagine he then looked at them and said: “do you remember?” While the women at the tomb had come to a new moment of recognition with the angel's question, “do you remember what he said to you,” these men come to a new moment of recognition as the risen Jesus breaks bread with them. Sometimes as we gather around this table we might not always know what to think about it. What exactly happens when we eat the bread of life and drink of the cup of salvation? The Mennonite tradition often speaks of this table as serving a memorial function – and indeed the words etched on this front table say “In remembrance of me.” But this memorial meal is much more than just an act of memory, recalling the past act of a past Jesus. Today we celebrate that Jesus is risen – that death has not consigned him and the love that defined him to the past. That Jesus is risen means that

this table continues to be a space of love's endurance through and beyond death. It is a space where again and again we come to recognize the enduring love and presence of Jesus in the bodies that gather around this table together. It is a space where we remember our enduring connection, too, to those departed saints in Christ that we have had to part with in this life.

So, on this Easter morning, come to the table of love's endurance. Know that the bread of life and the cup of salvation are placed before you as gifts of God's nourishment and hospitality. In a moment, you are invited to come to the front to receive the elements, and at this time I would invite the Elders up to help prepare the elements. Also, for those joining at home, you can prepare your elements now. At Bloomingdale, we practice an open table, meaning if you wish to receive the gifts of Jesus' table, they are yours to receive, for they are not ours to grasp onto and control, but God's to give. We also understand if some of you wish instead to receive a blessing, and I will be over here if you wish to come for a blessing. Children are welcome to come for a blessing too, and there are also grapes for children if they or their families would prefer that. For those receiving the elements, you will be served with these words:

The Bread of Life

The Cup of Salvation

So, come, friends. Come to the table of the Lord. Come and eat, for in this meal we see, hear, feel, and taste that the Lord is Good.

### **Prayer after Communion**

For these gifts of your table, O Lord, we give you thanks. Nourished and fed, send us to be bread and wine for the world for the sake of your kingdom. We pray through Christ's name, AMEN.