

“Amazing God”  
Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11;  
Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

The passage from Mark this morning starts out with three women walking down the road, wondering about what’s going to happen. As they walk, there must be some discussion about what has happened. It seems that their concern becomes focused on that stone that is in front of the grave. Perhaps the stone begins to represent all of their concerns. If they could just get rid of it, maybe everything would be OK. Yet, they get to the tomb and the stone is rolled back. They look inside and the young man tells them Jesus is raised. For us, this is a moment of celebration. This is the moment when we are able to say together, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!”

But they don’t quite say that. They aren’t quite there yet. I would like to think a little bit about where they are. It says they fled in terror and amazement. Well, I suppose if something that unusual happened that maybe I would flee in terror and amazement. I think their reaction is more than that. It’s more than just the empty tomb. It’s the question about why it’s empty.

The first thought was probably not that Jesus was raised, even though the guy in white inside the tomb said so. One of the concerns the women expressed was, “Where did you put Jesus? Where is his body? How are we going to care for him if he’s gone?” Particularly in that day and age, they may have wondered, “Are you trying to continue to degrade him by taking him from a good grave and putting him someplace else? And if you’re doing that to him, what are you going to do to me, a follower of Jesus?”

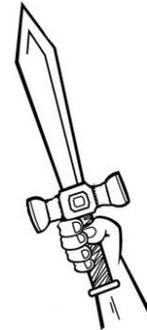
So immediately, there was some fear involved. I’m not so sure it was fear of what God had done, but rather fear of what humankind might do to them. What might the very powers that put Jesus in the grave in the first place do to them? That was one of their feelings—the terror of that moment.

The other was amazement. They aren’t quite the same, are they? Terror is full of fear, but with amazement one begins to get at that sense that there’s something bigger going on. Is God really at work here? Is something happening? Is what Jesus said was going to happen really happening? Is what the guy inside said true? Is Jesus raised? Then, perhaps, the thought also came, “What does that mean for me?”

It is as we think about all that, about how they were feeling as they encountered that empty grave, that I begin to think about us. How are we feeling today? How are we feeling as we come again to think about that empty grave? We have a lot of history behind it now, so there’s a lot of thought that goes with it. But perhaps we come wondering what it means for us. We come with all our sets of feelings and what’s going on in our lives. Is it simply the joy of the day, the opportunity to flower the cross, to hear wonderful music, to celebrate together? Is it that joy of being family together? Or do we also come with the sorrows and the grief and the losses of our lives, the loneliness and

the emptiness? We come with this whole set of complex feelings. In all the feelings of the women that first day at the grave, all the feelings of the disciples and their loss, all the feelings of the disciples across time, all the feelings we have as we gather today, God comes and enters in with us.

There's a temptation, especially for a preacher, to want to try to take all of this and make it work for you. It's interesting to me that there's a sense of wanting to try to overpower your sense of who you are and what you think. There's a sense in which God could have overpowered us with the power of Christ rising again. When the powers of humankind arrested Christ, put him on trial, and put him on the cross, you would think that the power of God would have been displayed, that God would have come in and cut them down. It seems that is what we would do. Pull out the sword and force the issue with violence.



It became interesting to me this year, as I thought about the crucifixion, how it was a demonstration of human sinfulness and violence put on display for the world ever since. It's interesting what God did with that. You see, it seems that what God did with the sword was turn it around; not to respond in kind, but to be put upon a cross of our violence and transform it into something beautiful. God didn't meet our force with force. He didn't overpower us with power. God's power was on display, but it was a power that showed that we couldn't overpower it. By rising again, God showed us that every power that we could throw at him is no power that can overpower him. Yet, he doesn't use that power to force us into anything. Instead, he invites us to recognize ourselves, to recognize the ways we try to deal with our problems, our conflicts, our rivalries, our struggles. That's what we did with Jesus. He was a problem. What do we do with problems? Overpower them? Kill them off?



What a contrast it is the way God deals with the problem of human sin, with our getting lost and wanting our own way. He comes to show us the power of love and grace, to show the power he has. He invites us. His power is a power that is used to invite. He invites us with a question, I think. The question goes something like this: Do you want a new way of life? Do you want a new way of living? Do you want to know the way I want to give you to live together? Or do you just want your own way – and how has that worked for you?

He is inviting us to know the wonder of who Jesus was: that he taught us, that he leads us, that he confronts power for us, that he reveals human violence and struggle, that he shows us that God is bigger than human power and/or violence and able to take it on, and that he takes on the sins of the world. He invites us, then, to join him and to recognize in following him we are given new life.

Sometimes we come to this day, and it's full of things like flowering the cross, where something is transformed before our eyes. There is that moment of joy; that moment

when we recognize that something is different. But I look at the ministry of Jesus and recognize that he didn't come in and heal everybody at once. He healed people as he encountered them. He walked into people's lives and invited them to change. I think he's doing the same thing today. As we recognize the power of the resurrection, he is inviting each of us, individually and together, to recognize that and to change together. We have those moments of joy, like the cross, but more often the change is something that happens over time.

It is after the women go away in terror and amazement that they begin to realize what has happened as it works its way into their lives, as the witness for Jesus continues to work in their lives. What I notice is that when that gradual change happens, what changes is the way I see the world. Sometimes I don't even recognize in the moment that things are changing. Instead, I can look back on my life and see that I would have reacted to something really differently just a few years ago. It is then that I can begin to recognize that the love of Jesus Christ is at work.

The power of God in our lives changes us in ways that we don't even recognize until later. Or if we recognize it, we don't see the full extent of where it takes us. But it leads us, as disciples of Christ, to new life. Perhaps it leads to a burying of violence and leads us into a life in which we begin to express the very love of God shown to us on the cross, the power of which is demonstrated in the resurrection.

We are invited to let go of our way and to follow Christ, to live into the resurrection and the wonder of who God is, the power of God among us, the love of God shared with us, the hope God has opened before us. What an amazing God!

We are invited to new life—to experience the resurrection and to see the change it makes in who we are each day, every day.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it is wonderful to gather together to celebrate the resurrection, to wonder at what you have done, how you have changed history. And yet you are not only in history, you have continued to change our lives. As we come to believe in you and trust in you and follow you, we leave what we think we want behind. We begin to recognize that where you lead us is truly the life we want—new life, full life, everlasting life. Lord, let us enter into the resurrection. Let us follow Jesus. Through Jesus Christ, the risen Savior, we pray. Amen.