

**“Terror and Amazement”**  
**Mark 16: 1-8**  
Easter Sunday- April 8, 2012  
Carbondale Community United Methodist Church  
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**Before reading of scripture**

The New Testament telling of the Easter story comes to us this year from the gospel of Mark. Before I read the scripture I’ll offer just a few words on Mark’s succinct telling of the resurrection in only eight verses. In short, the gospel of Mark seems to end shortly, as though the author were dragged away in mid-sentence.<sup>1</sup> It lurches to an awkward grammatical stop and ends with the tenuous word “afraid.” Unlike the other gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) Mark has no post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, no shouts of “he is risen!” no joyful seaside meals. Others also felt that Mark ended on the wrong note of fear, and so by the second century, Mark had two different appended different endings—neither of which reflect Mark’s style. New Testament scholars agree (and for scholars to agree on anything is quite amazing!) that these endings aren’t authentic to Mark. Mark intended for the gospel to end at verse eight without any shouts of victory, only panting as women run away in astonished silence. Hear the Easter story from the gospel of Mark.

**I. Terror and Amazement—in Greek**

“For terror and amazement had seized them.” The Greek word for terror is *tromos*, from which English derives the word ‘tremor.’ It means, quite literally to tremble, to quake from fear, great agitation of the mind. Think of a bride or groom’s trembling knees under their finery at a wedding. The Greek word for amazement is *ekstasis*, from which we get the English word ecstasy. *Ekstasis* means “a displacement of the mind from its ordinary state,” often translated as astonishment or amazement. So why would the author of Mark put trembling, knocking knees together with a mind in an extraordinary state? Why combine fear with amazement? Why do the Marys flee with both terror and astonishment? Perhaps because the most significant events in our lives hold both trembling and amazement. Perhaps because before we make a new beginning we experience both fear and being beside ourselves with excitement. Perhaps because before we can practice resurrection, before we can nurture new life in our lives, there exists both terror and astonishment within us.

**II. Terror and Amazement –in childbirth**

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, “Dangling Gospel,” *Christian Century*

I can think of no greater example in life of terror and amazement combined together, no better example of opening to a startling gift of new life, than the birth of a child. Each of you who are parents hold your own amazing stories of what it was like for you to see your child's face for the first time. For myself, intense terror and amazement wrapped together during the birthing of my son Elijah.

When my labor finally began around midnight on the first Sunday of Advent, I was amazed and calm—no terror yet. I labored at home all through the night and the next day at the midwife's recommendation. Then, at about hour seventeen I went through transition. Though I was committed to a natural childbirth, I remember thinking with gratitude that a surgical option did exist, should that be necessary. The amazement of labor was now mixed with some trembling fear. We traveled in the late afternoon's winter light to the birthing center, a beautiful place where we lit candles, put on our playlist on the ipod, and where my work continued. In the fearsome and amazing work of childbirth, I remember I could only be in the most present moment, though I did know I was at about hour twenty of labor. In this potency of time, I thought 'I am going to be in labor forever. I will no longer be called Melanie, but instead I shall be named "She Who is Always Giving Birth."' At this moment, my marvelous midwife looked me straight in the eyes and said, "You are going to give birth in the next couple of hours. You can do this." I looked at her with amazement for I was "She Who is Always Giving Birth."

My midwife was right. After twenty-two hours of labor, little Elijah made his appearance into the world. We were amazed. Here in my arms, finally, was this little one I had been falling in love with for the past nine months. I was also quite amazed that the baby was a boy; we didn't find out the gender and I was convinced the babe was a girl. So much for mother's intuition! We were amazed at his beautiful little fingers and toes, his sweet face, the gift of his presence with us. The room glowed with our amazement—and all those beeswax candles.

Then the terror set in. As I learned the sweet contours of his face I thought with some alarm, 'I am now completely responsible for this child's survival. Am I going to be able to keep him alive? Lord, help me. Not long afterwards the midwife took him to evaluate him, and noted that he wasn't breathing well. An oxygen mask fit down over his tiny face. A small ball of fear began to form in my stomach, which was already a mess anyway. Elijah still didn't breathe well after the oxygen. The midwife, after consulting with us, called the ambulance for our tiny newborn babe to be transferred to UNC Hospital, the big, sprawling state hospital

about five minutes away. As the ambulance lights flickered in our birthing room window and my husband and newborn son were swept away in the emergency, I was seized with terror for my tiny little five-pound child.

As it happened, Elijah just wanted a little fresh air; he was showing that he wanted to be an outdoorsy Colorado child. He started breathing fully on his own on the way into the NICU from the ambulance. His transient tachypnea of the newborn cleared within twenty-four hours. Then he had to be admitted to the hospital again a couple of days later for high bilirubin levels, and the cycle of terror and amazement continued. . . actually continues, for with a child such emotions remain ongoing. Amazement when they take their first steps, terror when they have their first tantrum (especially when that tantrum is right in front of the flowers at City Market). Amazement when they ski down the mountain, or play an instrument, or offer gentleness to another child, terror when they begin to drive a car. Amazement and terror when this child you've loved marries another beloved person. . . and on and on.

Actually, amazement and terror fit quite well with a marriage ceremony, don't they? Amazement that another person is committing to spend the rest of his or her life with you. . . and terror that another person is committing to spend the rest of his or her life with you. Any major new endeavor in life combines these two—terror and amazement. Think of beginning your first real job. Amazement that you are actually going to earn money and someone trusts you with this responsibility, and terror that you should fail or make a mistake (which you inevitably will). When we step forward in life into something new and different, whether it's having a child, or deciding after the death of a loved one to *live*, or changing our vocation, we might be seized with both terror and amazement at this novel thing we are doing.

### **III. Terror and Amazement –in the two Marys**

For Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James they aren't just stepping into something new and fresh, they are literally fleeing into it. In chapter fifteen verse 47 we are told that these Marys saw Jesus' body laid into the tomb. They, and not the deserting disciples, saw Jesus dead. These women, who had provided Jesus with food, shelter, clothing, and support during his ministry (15:41)—who had undoubtedly received affirmation and grace from him in return—ensured that he had a proper burial. Now, when they go back after the Sabbath day rest to the tomb to provide their beloved leader with the traditional anointing with myrrh done for the dead, an angelic, martyr-like young man tells them that Jesus has been raised, he is not there. He is going ahead of them to Galilee. They turn from the tomb and flee, running running running into a future they

don't understand, into a resurrection that makes no sense. They came seeking death, and instead find. . . emptiness and angelic promises. No wonder terror and amazement seize them.

Eventually, though, the women must have recovered. They must have stopped running. Breath must have come back to them. Courage must have filled their hearts—the courage necessary for women in a patriarchal society to speak forth such amazing news. After the trembling subsided, and the astonishment stopped tying up their tongues, they spoke with conviction and faith. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James did preach to Jesus' disciples the good news--or we wouldn't have the gospel of Mark. The sixteenth century reformer Martin Luther writes on these Marys that “these women show us a beautiful example of a spiritual heart that undertakes an impossible task, of which the whole world would despair. Yet a heart like this stands firm and accomplishes it, not thinking the task impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, generations later, we receive the proclamation that came from these first preachers. The author of the gospel of Mark intends for us to carry forth from his abrupt ending; we now move the story of Christ's resurrection forward. We are drawn to run to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee, or Carbondale, for that matter. This gospel's ending invites us into the story with a word of grace, promising that Jesus is going before us and offering us renewal.

#### **IV. Terror and Amazement—Our own practice of resurrection**

In the spirit of Mary of Magdalene and Mary mother of James on this Easter Sunday, I invite you to contemplate where in your life you might be called to step, or run, or flee into renewal. How might you, like the Marys, be called to practice resurrection? In other words, what newness might God be calling you to cultivate? What fresh novel thing are you being led to do? In this season of Easter, which lasts for fifty days, how might you practice new life? Eastertide, this time of the great fifty days until Pentecost, represents a marvelous opportunity for us to run into the resurrection. Easter coaxes us to embrace our own terror and amazement by opening up to becoming a new creation—a new creature in the light of the empty cross. I invite you now into a spirit of prayer for all things new.

Let us pray:

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “A Sermon on Christ's Resurrection” *Church Postil*  
[www.lectionarycentral.com/easter/LutherGospel.html](http://www.lectionarycentral.com/easter/LutherGospel.html) accessed on April 2, 2012

God who offers us new beginnings at Easter,

We pray for how you are leading us into new life this Easter season. We pray over what courageous step you are calling us to take to become a new creation—whether it may be through healing a relationship, or stepping into a new vocation, or whatever God is stirring in your heart. Let us offer silent prayer over this practice of resurrection. (*silence*)

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We pray, O God, for the trembling fear and astonishment that enters our hearts at even contemplating running on a new path in life. Still our knocking knees. Astonish us with the truth that we can actually do this new thing to which you are calling us. Let us offer silent prayer over our own terror and amazement. Let us offer prayer for courage to do this new thing.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Out of these prayers for our own ability to witness to resurrection, we pray for the whole world, for which Jesus lived and died and rose again. We pray for Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Mexico, Cuba, and troubled places in our own country.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for those who live constantly in terror, with little amazement to accompany it. We pray for those who endure domestic violence, for abused children, for abused elders. May they be comforted.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray that this Easter may be a time of reconciliation for all who are estranged or at enmity with each other.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray that we by our words and our lives may be witnesses to the living presence of the risen Lord in our world and community.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray all these things in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Beloved in Christ! People shall be gathered from north and south, from east and west, to feast at the heavenly banquet of the Lord. Christ our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast.  
Alleluia!