

Title: Terror & Amazement

Date: 3/31/2024 (Easter Sunday, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 9am & 11:15 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 25:6-9](#); [1 Corinthians 15:1-11](#); [Mark 16:1-8](#); [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Easter-Day-Terror--Amazement-e2hsqg1>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/xIw5eU6eeko?t=1841>

So 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. (Mark 16:8)

So, um, Happy Easter?

When we think about the emotions we associate with Easter, fear is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. Well, maaaybe if you've had a bad experience with a giant easter bunny.

To be fair, this account from the gospel according to Mark does share some similarities with other Easter accounts.

Women on their way to the tomb, early in the morning.

The stone rolled away from the entrance.

The absence of a body.

The presence of a young man with a message.

This young man tells the women not to be alarmed and that they will find Jesus in Galilee. And I imagine the three of them, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, nodding calmly, backing slowly out of the tomb, and then taking off as fast as they could.

Filled with terror and amazement, they ran for their lives. And they said nothing to anyone.

Imagine if the New Testament simply ended here.

Imagine if we just had one version of the gospel (one!), instead of four with timelines and details that don't quite match up. No letters from Paul for us to argue with. No Acts of the Apostles to show us what the disciples did with themselves after Jesus ascended to heaven. No texts of terror telling wives to obey their husbands and slaves their masters.

Can it be possible for the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mk 1:1), to end with the words, "for they were afraid"? (Mk 16:8)

How would that sit with you?

In the earliest days, it's likely that people would have heard the gospel according to Mark in one sitting. Roughly 95 minutes, no intermission.<sup>1</sup> I imagine the storyteller ending with these words, and then walking off the stage, leaving them in suspense.

Some people in the audience might be confused. They start murmuring, "Is that it?" "Is he going to finish the story?"

Some people in the audience might already know that the story doesn't end here. They've heard the news out of Galilee. They've heard the witness of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples. Clearly, the women told *someone*, otherwise we wouldn't have this account.

Today, we began the service with:

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.

**The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia!**

Not much fear and terror is that is there?

When we proclaim that Christ is risen, we proclaim that God has overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life.<sup>2</sup>

We proclaim, as the prophet Isaiah did, that God has swallowed up death forever, that God has destroyed the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations (Isa 25:6-9). So, we cry, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa 25:6-9).

We proclaim as the psalmist did, that "The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (Ps 118:14). So, we cry, "On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24).

When we hear the word "salvation" and by extension, the word "saved," what do we think of?

God's giant hands catching us before we fall into the fires of hell?

Signs on corners predicting that the end is near?

Jesus dying in our place to repay our debt to a punishing God so that we can qualify for eternal life?

I can see how all of **these** things would trigger more fear than rejoicing, more terror than gladness.

It's tricky to talk about sin, even in church. We come with all kinds of assumptions about where sin comes from (poor Eve) and how to defend ourselves against it. We come with all kinds of judgments about who is more likely to sin or cause other people to sin.

Moreover, how did Jesus save us? What did Jesus save us from? It's not like human beings stopped committing sins after the crucifixion. It's not like Christians are known

for consistently being on the side of life and love when it comes to interacting with people of different religions and ethnicities, genders and sexualities.

It might be more helpful to come at this from a different angle. If we think of God as our source of life, then sin is that which turns us away from God. It disrupts our relationship with God and the people of God, the creatures of God and the creation of God.

Sin breaks our connection to God and to each other. Sin puts the individual in front of the community, the “I” in front of the “us.” Sin makes us think we’re better than those who came before; it keeps us from seeing that we’ve been grafted onto the vine and we continue to be nourished by it. It keeps us focused on fear and scarcity and death when there is and can be so much joy and abundance and life...for ALL of us, not just a select few.

In the book *A Practical Christianity*, the Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw writes that the two biggest sins of our times are “self-will and the abiding belief in our willpower” because “they trick us into believing that we can totally control and cope with every aspect of our lives, our emotions, our pain. They prevent us from *experiencing* faith as the transformation of our lives, and make us think that faith is about getting it right.”<sup>3</sup>

Sin tells us that salvation is ours if we try hard enough, if we are smart enough, if we read enough self-help books, if we believe in the right things, if we accept the right savior.

But salvation, as embodied by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is not so much about doing the right thing or having the right answers. Jesus embraced the Scriptures, **and** he challenged them. He danced between the letter of the law **and** the spirit of the law. Instead of giving his disciples a list of beliefs to sign on to, he told them open-ended parables for them to keep wrestling with together.

Salvation, as embodied by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is a life centered on God and grounded in Scripture. It’s a way of life that restores our connection to God and each other. Living as Jesus did keeps us moving, as we see in the life he lived with the disciples. What we learn affects how we do things, and what we do helps us see new layers in what we’ve learned. It takes us to unexpected places, across physical borders and boundaries, and into each other’s lives. It helps us stay humble and open so that instead worrying about getting it “right,” we can focus on following God’s life-giving Spirit.

This is at the heart of what we will do in a moment, when we reaffirm our baptismal vows, (or in the case of Cole and Stella, make them). First, we will say what we believe, then, we will make a series of promises. We make these promises to God, to ourselves, and in front of one another.

-We promise to continue to live as the apostles did, in teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.

-We promise to resist evil and, whenever we fall into sin (not if, but when), to repent and return to the Lord.

-We promise to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Don't worry, (Stella and Cole), we don't claim that we'll do all this at once. We don't guarantee that we can live like this all the time. We lean on God, and we ask for God's help. We lean on each other, we promise to support each other in this new life in Christ and show up for each other as part of this body of Christ.

When we are together, these promises feel less overwhelming, less terrifying. There's maybe a little less to fear in life, because we aren't alone in this, because we don't have to do any of this alone

As we celebrate the end of Lent and the beginning of Easter, we are reminded that God has **already** overcome death and opened the gates to everlasting life.

The tomb is empty.

Jesus is not there.

Jesus has gone ahead of us, and Jesus will keep reminding us that we are already saved, and already loved.

There's nothing to earn, nothing to prove. There is **always** more than enough.

Our job is to live fully into all of this, to keep turning back toward restoration and wholeness.

Our task is to share the stories we have received and add to them our own stories.

Our part is to recognize God's gifts of grace and love at work in us and with us and around us, to name and share those gifts.

This is awesome. This kind of freedom is terrifying in an amazing way. If we don't have to earn salvation, then why show up at church? If our success can't be measured in health or wealth or status, how will we know we're doing it right? What will we measure and work toward?

Traditionally, churches are measured by their average Sunday attendance, the number of people that show up on a Sunday morning. Alternatively, churches are measured by their income, their monetary value. This is because it is hard to quantify engagement and transformation.

**AND** I believe you can walk into a place and get a sense of the spirit and soul of the people who are there and the people who have been there.

I pray that anyone who ends up on this hill for- church, for something in the Parish Life Center, or even for turning around because their GPS got confused, will sense that this is a place of resurrection and restoration.

May this be a place where neighbors and nonprofits and people looking for a cool place on a hot day find belonging and commonality.

May this be a place where God and God's people love us our brokenness into wholeness.

May this be a place where we know that we don't have to earn or prove anything, so we can explore what it means to be children of God, to play and be co-creators with God.

Praying these prayers feel amazing AND terrifying. It's time to run so that we and those we share this witness with can come fully alive.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVFQfPTJPq8>

<sup>2</sup> See Collect of the Day for Easter Sunday

[https://lectionarypage.net/YearB\\_RCL/Easter/BEasterPrin\\_RCL.html](https://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEasterPrin_RCL.html)

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, Jane. A Practical Christianity. p47