

Sermon Title: Seized by Surprise

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

“So they exited and fled from the tomb for terror (*tromos*: shaking) and amazement (*ekstasis*: blended fear and wonder) had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (v8).

In the oldest gospel manuscripts, this verse was the only ending to the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel ends with a very graphic description: these eyewitnesses to the resurrection were in a state of emotional siege. They were unwillingly being held in the grasp of strong emotions; they were in a state of ‘fear and trembling,’ a term which Paul uses to describe his own emotions as he stands up to speak about the Gospel in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 2:3). They were breathless, wordless, terrified. Literally, they were shaking and quaking. At the same time, they were overpowered with surprise and amazement. They were seized by an indescribable joy, an undeniable gladness that Jesus might still be alive, or alive again—the words of resurrection hope still fresh in their memories.

Psychologically speaking, they were standing outside of themselves (*ek-static*) and watching what was going on as from a distance—what we might call an out-of-body experience. In the modern vocabulary, their minds were blown away. They were utterly distracted, their thinking was disrupted; they were unable to follow their normal routines with any kind of present-mindedness. They were in a blended state of “fear and wonder,” not quite able to identify how they really felt, a blend

of extreme caution, unsettling fear and overreaching joy.

Three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, were the first to visit the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed on that fateful day before the Sabbath, the first to discover that the tomb was empty, the heavy stone rolled away, the body removed, the linen clothes gone. A young man dressed in a white robe greeted them with the words: "Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified; He has been raised, he is not here." The young man pointed to the place where the body had been laid. At some point, it must have come to mind, 'Was it really as Jesus had told them?' In a mere three (3) days, he would be raised from death, the temple of his body rebuilt. They had been reluctant, even afraid, to believe something that seemed so outlandish as being raised from the dead. Surely, there would be an explanation that would render his words understandable, words that would reveal the mystery of it all. Little did they realize that the prediction behind his words would jump into their personal space and take hold of them and possess them with its reality. But they did not see him or his body. All they saw was an empty tomb. Yet, they were seized by the truth of what they did not see. They were ready to believe without any evidence or proof.

'You will see him in Galilee, just as he told you,' said the young man in the white robe, who seemed to know everything about him, and even everything about them,

about the disciples, about Peter.

Two of the three had seen him laid in this exact place inside the tomb, the day before the Sabbath. They had seen the heavy stone rolled against the entrance of the tomb with their own eyes. In their minds, it would take several strong men to roll it away so that they could bring in the burial spices after the Sabbath. So, they had come to the tomb with some distress over how they might get help in removing the stone. Their prayers were answered, only in a way that surprised them greatly, because no heavy work was allowed during the Sabbath, not even by Gentiles living among them, and they were among the first, if not the first, ones to arrive after Sabbath. Who could have moved this stone and why? Mark tells us this ‘surprise’ was alarming, not calming and re-assuring. Like most of us, it is not our natural way to think about what is missing when we enter a room; our first tendency is to look for what is present in the room. It takes a sizeable mind-shift to jolt us into thinking about what is not present. The young man in the white robe pointed out what was missing. They were immediately seized by the thought of what was not there—the body wrapped in linen was not there. They were described as being frozen in shock, held down by their fear joined inextricably with their joy. Their minds are frozen too; the young man in the white robes had to guide them in their next steps: ‘go, tell his disciples and especially Peter.’ Perhaps, he even led

them out of the grave and pointed them back to Jerusalem. It would not be surprising if he had to do this. We all know how shock can affect our ability to plan or to take our next steps.

Now, I would like to engage you in a sidebar to this experience of the three women. I will set the background for you. A short addition to verse 8, that appears in later manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark, suggests that these three women not only told Peter, and some of those who were around him, what they had experienced at the empty tomb, but they did so in a ‘prompt but brief’ fashion rather than an extensive one. This seems likely because shock tends to compress the narrative and details are submerged in our consciousness. Peter and the others immediately surrounding him were only given a ‘brief’ account. They must have had many questions, but the shock of what occurred must have blocked their access to the answers. The one who wrote the shorter ending of the Gospel of Mark must have been blocked as well. We are left with an unfinished gospel! A song without a bridge to get home, a narrative without closure, as story without an ending. If the gospel is to be finished, we must finish it ourselves!

The short addition suggests that Jesus sent out the message of the Gospel using these three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome,

‘from east to west, the sacred (*hieros*: acceptable and holy) and imperishable (*aphthartos*: undecaying) proclamation (*kerugma*) of eternal salvation.’ Later scholars describe this short addition as doubtful, probably because it does not specifically mention the role of Peter and the other disciples in the proclamation of the gospel to the world. We might reasonably assume that they were also sent with this same message, but the shortness of the account does not say this.

However, this short addition does offer great value in its description of the gospel message as ‘undecaying’ and ‘imperishable.’ How often do we hear this?

Pastors/People are called to preach (or proclaim through action) a holy and sacred gospel that never decays. Think about that for a moment. Does the gospel we hear from day to day ever decay in our presence? Are we ever aware of the gospel as being less than it was when we originally heard it? If we are less than enthusiastic at any given moment in our lives, is the decay inside of us or inside of the gospel?

Do we need to hear it again to renew its power inside of us? Our lives being perishable, but the gospel imperishable? Maybe we need Easter more than once a year. Maybe we need to hear its message a lot more than we do, to feel its power inside of us. Maybe we even need the gospel more than once a week? Maybe, to feel its true power, we need it once a day. We inherit an ‘undecaying’ gospel. Our call is to keep it so inside of our spirits, to keep Easter in our hearts every day.

The longer addition to the ending of Mark has great value as well. “And they went out and preached everywhere, and Jesus worked through them, confirming his word by the signs that accompanied it.” Not only is our gospel undecaying, but Jesus works through our preaching and actions to proclaim it. Jesus gives the message its undecaying power. Jesus acts through us blessing our every effort, making it powerful. The Good News of Jesus Christ is pastoral and powerful. We are not ever left alone to make our claims. The Easter message carries its own undecaying power, working through us, through our mouth, through our inflections, through our breath, through our behavior, through our body language, through our reflective silence and through the timing of our pauses, through what we say, (or don’t say), the way we say it, and how it is received, and how it is heard. Who is it that has not wondered what it would be like if everyone heard exactly what we said and how we intended to say it? We know that this would be hoping for too much. Yet, what if we had a message that was always received as it was given, a message that preached itself, that continually renewed itself, inside of us, keeping us in the power of its originality.

What if we had a message that never leaked its power when transmitted, never leaked its meaning because it was embodied in human words to achieve its

communication? What if we had a message that, when portrayed in images, carried the power of ‘what you see is what you get?’ (so-called WYSIWYG technology).

What if we had a message that needed no translation, interpretation, or explanation? A message that was universally understood immediately without needing a repeat? What if we had a message that, when put into any human language, never decayed in meaning with that language over time (as we know all languages do)? What if we had a message that never decayed in meaning and power? A Gospel for the Ages? A timeless Word? What if we had a message that conveyed itself backward and forward in the same fashion (chiasm)? What if we had a message that carried more truth than the individual words would allow (synergy)? An undecaying meaning and power? Is that even possible? Is it possible that the gospel gets through to others even when we fail it, when our weakness weighs it down and fails to carry it properly?

Actually, it is precisely this, that when we are weakest, then we are strongest, says Paul (2 Cor. 12:10). He writes: “I do not convey the gospel with eloquent wisdom, otherwise the cross would be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:17).” While the tomb is empty, the cross should not be.

Christ Crucified is the message! The victory sounds forth from the defeat. Power is not hosted in thousands of crusading armies; Power is hosted in the sacrificial love

of thousands of ambassadors for peace, going door to door, person to person, to make the peace. The symbol of the cross is the power. The peace contains the power. It never decays! What happened on Good Friday lingers with us through Easter! It is not negated by it. The message of Easter confirms the cross; it does not remove it. The undecaying message of the gospel is that our sin is buried Good Friday deep. Another way of saying this is that our sin is removed from us as far as the east is from the west, the north from the south, always beyond the edge of the universe, if there is such an edge. Good Friday deep is infinite deepness. Grace always outpaces our sin. The undecaying gospel always has power to renew us! We can hear it as many times as we need to. It never grows old. It always makes us fully alive. Death cannot survive when Jesus is in the room, in the neighborhood, in the state, in the nation, in the world, in the universe.

Are we fully alive today? I suggest we are, not because of anything we have done, but because Christ lives today. Then, this being the case, repeat with me, ... Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!