

“Fear and Ecstasy, Knowing Everything Has Changed” based on Isaiah 55:6-13 and Mark 16:1-8
Delivered on April 4, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We proclaim the foundation of our faith. What can be said that has not been said before, that I have not said throughout Lent, that I don't pretty much touch on in every sermon. So then today, I want us to ponder the ecstasy, the intense joy of God's promise, and, also, the trembling. The frightening realization of knowing everything has changed. And yet still, here we are the same world that did this to Jesus.

This message in Mark's resurrection account is one that we need in the world today. Mark says our fears and joys coexist, and still Jesus goes out ahead of us, even if we don't understand him, if we run away from him, and even if we deny him. He will meet us, where we live.

The account today from Mark does not carry with it the victorious feel of the other gospels, but for Mark, perhaps the resurrection is not the central point of what he is writing. He is writing to a world skeptical of the idea that a crucified man is King. A world does not believe. And not only that, Mark shows us that it is by his crucifixion, not simply in spite of it, that he reigns.

This is why the suffering servant of Isaiah 40-55 is crucial here, where the servant dies and then is suddenly alive in the glorious start of a new creation, in the promises of God. For Mark, the victory of God, was won on the cross and the resurrection is its vindication. Mark knows it doesn't make sense to a world that sees power in victories and dominance, as the meaning of what we achieve. It doesn't make sense to glorify a man who has been crucified. He shows us the confusion of disciples throughout the whole gospel. We see them confused by his powers, by his love for the least among them, confused by what it means for him to be the Messiah in the middle of the gospel, and now confused at its end by what it means for him to have died.

The three Galilean women did not expect Jesus to actually die. How do I know this? Because Mark tells us that after sundown on the Sabbath, they went out, and had to buy the spices to prepare his body. They had no plan to roll away the stone. Perhaps all the men were scattered, unavailable, or unwilling, to help them with it. These women did not understand what Jesus had been saying all along, none of them did. So, they did what they knew – they chose to be faithful, not to their Lord, or even a king, but to their friend Jesus. They wanted to give him a measure of dignity in his death, a proper burial that normally would have been denied to someone considered cursed by God because he was hanged on a tree.

They were 'utterly astonished,' indeed 'amazed' and 'overwhelmed,' when they got there and saw that the stone was rolled back. Inside is a young man who says, 'Do not be so astonished,' as if to say, 'He said this is how it would happen.' And then the man proclaims the truth to them. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene. He is risen. He is not here.' My guess is that the astonishment of the women did not end here, just because he said, 'do not be.' But that it remained as now they were seized with trembling – the Greek word is the root of our word 'Trauma' – and seized with joy, again the Greek word is the root of ecstasy. Surely, the joy was the revelation that their friend was alive again, risen, and surely, there was joy in what this

meant for them, but also fear, because they were at the same tomb in which he was buried, and in the same world that crucified the innocent Jesus in the first place.

Friends, this is all of us right now, as we look out on a broken world all around us. We are joyful on this morning, and certainly I hope some of you are ecstatic with me, but we also have reason to tremble and fear because we see so much suffering. Here we are in a rapidly changing culture, living through a pandemic, which has claimed 550,000 loved ones throughout our country. It has drastically changed the way we live and interact, even the way we go to church with Easter online again for the second year in a row. We tremble because we don't understand, and perhaps we are silent like the women, needing a moment, as they did, to process it all.

In the world around us, even in the church today, many still seek power as Rome did, as a means to an end, to be the ones in control, and to be winners in this world by this world's standards. But Jesus did not come to win as the world wins. He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, as Mark wrote. God's ways are higher than ours.

The power of the world is meaningless and void, when faced with the reality of an empty tomb. And as Isaiah wrote, 'God's word comes down, and does not return empty to God.' It accomplishes what God intends. And so, my friends, the Word of God came down in Christ Jesus and even when buried, it rose up again and returned to the Father accomplishing what God intended. He is the one who gave his life as a ransom, and by his wounds we are healed.

It didn't matter that the women did not understand this at first, they were now being called to be the first to proclaim the gospel to the world, just as I am doing right now. They proclaimed that God is with us in Jesus our crucified Lord and Savior, our crucified and now risen King!

But what of the disciples who scattered, who abandoned Jesus when times got tough? The man in the tomb said to tell Jesus's disciples that 'he goes before you to Galilee, at that place you will see him, just as he said to you.' Even though the women did not fully understand Jesus's words, still, they were called to proclaim the gospel to the world. And even though the disciples crumbled under pressure, Jesus wanted them to do exactly the same thing, and he would meet them in Galilee, in the world, in the place where they all lived.

Friends, even the most ardent believers in this good news, the so-called 'best Christians,' are still sinners who fall short of the glory of God and give in to sin every single day. If you've figured out how not to, let me know. Every day, we do things that do not make God the priority in our lives, and we do not show love for our neighbors in the way we love ourselves. In these moments we are like the disciples who scattered, we still believe and hope, but there is uncertainty, enough to allow us to give in to this world's temptation. But hear the message that Jesus left his disciples, because this message is for you too, 'He goes before you into the world, at that place you will see him, just as he said.'

No matter what you have done, there is always love and room for you to come back, to be reconciled with God in Jesus, to rejoin in his ministry of reconciliation, not to be entitled to escape the world and go to heaven when we die, but to be empowered to remake this world

and reveal heaven in it, knowing death will not be the end, and all will be made new. You and I are beloved, so, even though we scatter at times, the Lord is calling your name and mine always.

I love that the young man's message in Mark also calls out Peter distinctly. Peter did not just scatter in fear, but Peter actively denied that he even knew Jesus. Peter cut himself off from the other disciples, and from Jesus, by his words. By his grief, we know that Peter was clearly ashamed of this, ashamed of himself. Perhaps you are like Peter, and you have actively denied Jesus, and like Peter, perhaps you feel shame, as though there is no coming back from this. Remember that Jesus called for Peter specifically, and so, Jesus is calling your name too today, specifically, because Jesus will always take you back.

The story of Scripture is about the love of God for humanity and all creation in God's desire to free us from sin and death, to restore all of creation through us. God called people, establishing covenants with them for this purpose. Yet, when humanity could not fulfill these covenants, God became human like us – came down to us in Jesus, to live as we live, but without sin, and to die as we die, but in the most horrific way, to rise as we will rise, revealing the glory of God.

Mark seems to leave us to wrestle with the notion that there is unfinished business, that it is both joyful to know that death will not be the end, but it is frightening to think that we are called to walk on that road with Jesus. Mark writes because he knows many are questioning a crucified King, and so I think we see this ending line up well with Isaiah 55. Mark does not leave us with what we want to hear, some neat bow to have it all make sense to us in our logic and our ways. Mark leaves us yearning for the comfort of Isaiah, and the reminder that God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways and thoughts are higher.

Mark leaves us with the trembling and the fear, because we can identify with this easily. This is where we are. This is our Galilee. This is the place we live as human beings. The whole of Mark's gospel is a fast-paced action thriller to show us first who Jesus is as the Son of God, one with the God of Israel, the Messiah. Then Mark takes us to when the disciples realize this, when they start to understand, and Jesus predicts his death. They are confused again, but Jesus says to follow him. And so, they do, all the way to Jerusalem, and even when all that Jesus predicted comes true, they again do not understand, they scatter in fear and even deny they knew Jesus.

These are disciples we can identify with. We know this fear and trembling. We know this lack of understanding. We know this scattering and we know this denial. But Mark also leaves us with ecstasy, the joy, the story we can look at in its entirety and see the reality, that Jesus has died for us, so that we can share in his ministry in the world. This is a ministry of service, to overturn the ways of this world, just as he did sin and death. This is so that in our fear and trembling, so that in our joy and even in our ecstasy, we might remember the empty tomb shows us everything has changed. No matter how little we understand, how many times we sin, and even our denials, the Lord Jesus gave his life for us, and rose from the grave for us. The resurrection vindicates the cross, because now the risen king, again call us to him.

Rejoice in the words of Isaiah we will sing, "Though the mountains may fall, and the hills turn to dust, the love of the Lord, will stand." Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 16:1-8 (Pastor's Translation) And having ***continued*** through the ***Sabbath***, ***Mary*** Magdalene and ***Mary***, ***mother*** of ***James***, and ***Salome***, bought ***spices***, in order that they might ***prepare*** ***Jesus's*** ***body***. And very ***early*** on the first ***day*** of the ***week***, they came to the ***tomb*** when the ***sun*** was rising. And they were saying among themselves, 'Who will roll away for us the ***stone*** from the ***door*** of the tomb?' And having ***looked*** up, they ***observed*** that the stone had been ***rolled*** away, for it was ***extremely large***. And having ***entered*** into the tomb, they saw a young ***man sitting*** on the right, ***clothed*** in a white ***robe***, and they were utterly ***astonished***. But he ***called*** to them, 'Do not be so. You seek ***Jesus***, the ***Nazarene***, who was ***crucified***. He is ***risen!*** He is not here! ***Behold***, the place where they laid him. But go, say to his ***disciples*** and to ***Peter***, that he goes before you into ***Galilee***. At that place you will see him, just as he said to you.' And having gone out, they fled from the tomb, for ***trembling*** and ***ecstasy*** had ***seized*** them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were ***afraid***.