

Be Astonished
Part Ten: The Resurrection
Mark 16.1-8

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Today is the day that hope was born. Easter is the birthday of Christian hope.

Between the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, by dying a death that conquered death and purchased life and forgave sin and opened the way to a restored relationship with God, and then by rising from death to life to vindicate his authority, Jesus opened the way for us to share in his victory forever.

Today we celebrate that hope, so beautifully captured in the confession of faith that we just heard sung.

For the past few months we've been studying the gospel of Mark, the first biography of Jesus. We have watched how, to the astonishment of those who surrounded him, Jesus brought forgiveness and healing and new life wherever he went, to a suffering woman, to a despondent boy, to a blind man, to a dead girl.

Now, through his death and resurrection, what was available to some people in one place and time becomes available to all people in all places and times. Jesus offers forgiveness and wholeness and deliverance and new life for all who put their confidence in him.

This is the day our hope was born, when Jesus rose from the dead, meaning that we could enjoy a relationship with him forever – the relationship for which God created us. In that, in him, is our great comfort in life and in death.

We know the Easter story from beginning to end – how the day started with despair and ended with joy. It doesn't hold any more surprises for us.

We have the benefit of two thousand years of hindsight, but for those first followers of Jesus, who were grappling to make sense of what was happening before their eyes, it was a different story. No one yet realized that Jesus' defeat was actually His victory, that his death and what followed would prove to be the ultimate display of his divine power and authority.

In the last chapter of his gospel, Mark takes us back to the moment when the reality of what this day meant first began to dawn.

Let's walk through the events of that morning. Let's look at the most astonishing of all the astonishing things that Jesus did – walking out of a tomb – and experience the utter shock of the very first people to discover that he had.

Our text is the last chapter of Mark's gospel, chapter 16. Here's how the chapter begins:

Mark 16.1

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

From the beginning, women were a crucial part of the band of followers that accompanied Jesus.

Luke 8.1-3 tells of the absolutely crucial role that women played in his ministry.

[As Jesus went from town to town], preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, . . . Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager; Susanna; and *many others* who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples.

Mark 15.40-41 tells us that a number of women were present at the crucifixion, unlike the men, most of whom had fled.

Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome, [all] women [who] had followed him and cared for his needs. *Many other women* who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. [Most of them were named Mary, it seems – the more the Mary-er I guess]

And Mark tells us at the end of chapter 15 that the women were present at the burial too.

Joseph and Nicodemus, two Christ followers who were part of the Jewish high council, quickly anointed and wrapped the body of Jesus, but they had to hurry because of the setting sun and the start of the Sabbath.

Mark 15.46-47 says

They placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

Now we come to Sunday morning, and here we find these faithful women again, here to prepare his body properly: bathing it, anointing it with an ointment made from olive oil, myrrh, and aloe, and then wrapping it in long linen strips.

Mark 16.2-3

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”

Sabbath went from sundown to sundown. By the time the Sabbath ended it was too dark for the women to go to the tomb, so they had to wait until first light.

They stop and buy the oil and spices they will need to anoint the body and then they head for the tomb in which they had watched Jesus be placed two nights before.

Ancient Jewish Tomb



In this part of the country, which was covered with hills of solid limestone, Jewish tombs were usually carved right into the side of a hill.

After a small room was chiseled out, a huge round stone was fashioned and fitted into a sloped groove in front of it. The slope on the ground kept the stone locked in place. One person could roll it closed, but it would have taken several people to roll the stone back.

Imagine what the women were feeling at this point, carrying these tangible expressions of their devotion and grief, and thinking about what they were about to do next . . .

Mark 16.4

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

Just pause there for a moment. What if you were one of those women? What would you be feeling now?

Mark 16.4

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

Ancient Jewish Tomb Interior

Jewish graves were usually small rooms with a single low opening. Inside they had two or three ledges on which bodies were laid that were also a place for the grieving to sit in mourning.

Think about what they would have seen as they came up to the tomb:

First, standing outside: the open tomb, the door unexpectedly rolled back.

Next, as they came to the entrance and leaned over and looked in, their eyes beginning to adjust to the darkness: the empty ledge in front of them, the body unexpectedly gone.

Then, as they ducked in, and their eyes further began to adjust to the dark: a person sitting to their right.

And not just any person. Something about his appearance and his bearing, sitting there clothed in white, suggests he isn't just another human being. And he seems to be waiting for them.

In this sermon series we've been focusing on all the different words Mark used to capture the fear and amazement that people experienced when they saw the things Jesus did.

In these last eight verses of his gospel Mark reuses almost all of those words. Here's the first one. It says the women were "alarmed." That's one way to put it. This word actually means "beside themselves with astonishment."

Mark 16.6

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.”

If his presence the tomb isn’t enough, and his otherworldly appearance on top of that, the words of this messenger are even more astonishing:

The one you just saw breathe his last two days ago on the cross, the one you love so dearly – he’s alive! He is risen! The place of the dead isn’t the place to find the living.

Mark 16.7

“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

The angel reminds the women of the promise Jesus made at the end of the last supper, just a few days before, words that made no sense to them then. Mark 14.28:

After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.

Beloved followers of Jesus, he is going ahead of you. And you will see him!
His death wasn’t the end. It was the beginning. You will see him!
Your relationship with him can continue and grow. You will be able to enjoy his loving presence forever! He is going ahead of you and *you will see him*.

Mark 16.8

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The end.

A divine messenger, a whirlwind of astonishment, a sudden dash – and then the gospel comes to an abrupt end. That’s it. Utterly unresolved.

If you have an older translation like the King James Bible or the RSV, your Bible probably has twelve more verses after verse 8.

But most newer copies of the New Testament stop here with a note that says something like: “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-20.”

There are actually several endings to the gospel that have been found in old manuscripts, one that is just a couple of sentences long, another that is twelve verses long, others that are a combination of the two. But none of them is considered authentic. Here’s the main reason why.

You know we don't have any of the original New Testament manuscripts, but we do have ancient copies. Four hundred years ago, when the King James was translated from the Greek, they only had a handful of early copies.

Since then, thousands more have been discovered, some of which are quite a bit older than the ones they had then, and none of the earliest copies have any of those endings to Mark's gospel.

From everything we can tell, the gospel of Mark was written before 70AD, and the earliest of these other endings doesn't appear until about seventy five years later. The original gospel seems to just end here.

Of course, we know there's more to the story. The other gospels go one and tell us . . .

Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene immediately after this moment.

Then the women ran straight to the disciples.

Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty.

Later that afternoon Jesus appeared to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus.

That night Jesus appeared to the disciples in the room where they gathered.

A week later he appeared to them again, this time with Thomas.

Over the next forty days he appeared to many others.

He eventually spent time with his disciples in Galilee.

And then, after forty days, surrounded by his disciples, he ascended to heaven.

So why does Mark end here?

All kinds of reasons have been suggested. Mark died before he finished. The scroll got torn off. He planned to write a sequel. Or this is exactly how he intended to end it.

Whatever may have been the original reason the gospel ended here, as followers of Christ we believe the Bible has authority because of the Holy Spirit who both inspired and preserved its writings. So we can be confident this is exactly how God intended for it to come to us.

Here's why I think God allowed the story to end here. And I suspect – I'm not sure but I suspect – it's what Mark intended all along.

We know that when Mark recorded Peter's stories and wrote his gospel, his concern wasn't just to capture what Jesus said and did. He also wanted to capture how people *responded* to him. That's why astonishment and fear and the other related words are repeated so often throughout the gospel.

Mark knows that this biography he's writing is unlike any other biography because this Jesus is unlike any other man.

In the end, how we respond to a biography about Julius Caesar or Cleopatra doesn't really matter. But with Jesus it's different. The Bible teaches that our response to Jesus does matter. A lot. It actually matters more than any other decision we will ever make in our lives.

Mark records for us that, wherever Jesus went, the response to him was divided. Some drew towards him, knelt before him, followed after him. Others walked away from him, drove him away, plotted against him. There wasn't a third group of people who were indifferent.

The men and women who followed after Jesus, including these women, have seen him heal people and forgive people and set people free from demonic power and calm storms and walk across the chaos, and now, on top of all that, they find his tomb empty and an angel telling them Jesus is alive.

In these last verses of his gospel, as Mark brings these faithful women into the empty tomb, he brings us along with them. He presents us with the evidence, he lets the words of the angel ring in our ears, he lets us share the utter astonishment of the women, and then he leaves us at that crucial moment – before the story resolves.

To appreciate this moment more, I think we need to step back and become part of a wider biblical conversation that has been going on since all the way back in the early pages of the Old Testament. The conversation is about the idea of *fearing God*. It's a key dimension of faith, found over a hundred times in Scripture.

Deuteronomy 10.12-13

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

Proverbs 9.10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,

Ecclesiastes 12.13

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and obey him.

Isaiah 8.13 NLT

Do not fear anything except the LORD Almighty. He alone is the Holy One. If you fear him, you need fear nothing else.

Jesus concurs. In Luke 12.5 he says:

I will tell you who you should fear: Fear God.

And Luke tells us that the fear of God was one of the qualities that demonstrated the spiritual health of the early church. Acts 9.31

Then the church ... enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

According to the Bible, fear is the normal response that a human being should have toward God. [See II Corinthians 5.11 and Romans 3.10-18]

But as soon as I say that, I need to clarify what the Bible means by fearing God.

When we use the word *fear* in English, it always combines two separate ideas: recognizing that something has the power to impact us, but not trusting it.

So we might fear a terrorist but not a soldier.

But in the Biblical way of thinking, fear just expresses the first of those ideas: fearing something means taking it seriously, respecting it as something that has the power to impact us and to change the course of our lives, for good or for ill.

Whether or not we can trust that person or thing we fear is a separate question.

If I trust the one I fear, I move toward him. With joy and freedom and gratitude, knowing he has the power to impact my life for good.

If I don't trust the one I fear, I run from him. I hide from him. I feel as though I need to protect myself from him.

One of the most amazing poems ever written is called *The Hound of Heaven*, by Francis Thompson. It's the story of a man who runs from God because he knows God has the power to impact his life but he doesn't trust him. He wants to be independent of God. He doesn't want to have to answer to God.

It begins with these words

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
... down Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears ...
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

Fear with trust causes us to approach him, and to open our lives up to him.
Fear without trust causes us to flee him, and to close our lives off from him.

With that in mind, let me bring us back to the end of Mark's gospel. All through these chapters Mark has captured for us the response of the disciples and the crowds as they have watched Jesus heal a paralyzed person, and forgive a sinful person, and set free a

demon-controlled person, and raise a dead person, and quiet a raging storm, and walk across the churning chaos.

Mark describes the emotions they felt: awe, astonishment, wonder, amazement, trembling, fear, dread. Clearly they have come to take Jesus seriously, experiencing fear in the Hebrew sense: they recognize that they are in the presence of no ordinary man, and that this person before them has the power to impact the trajectory of their lives and change its shape forever.

I think part of why Mark focuses so much on their response of fear is to press us to consider what we fear. Who or what do we take seriously?

We have an interesting relationship to fear in our culture. We love producing artificial experiences of fear: roller coasters, horror movies, dramatic news headlines. But in today's culture of irony there is almost nothing we take seriously.

Mark presses us to ask: What do we fear? What do we take seriously? How seriously do we take Jesus?

If we don't take Jesus seriously, either as a threat or as the King he claims to be, I would suggest we have never looked at him closely. I say that as someone who for years as an atheist dismissed Jesus as no more than a good man and a wise teacher. Then I actually read the gospels.

Mark has shown us that wherever he goes Jesus divides. He inspires worship and he incites hate. The one thing he doesn't generate is yawns of indifference.

The only way someone could say that don't take Zach Edey seriously as a basketball player is if they've never faced him on the court. In the same way, I think the only way someone could say they don't take Jesus seriously is if they have never come face to face with him in the gospels.

Mark presses us to ask: How seriously do you take Jesus? According to the Bible, how we view him is more important than any other consideration in our entire lives.

It is because these women take Jesus seriously that they find themselves at his tomb. Now Mark brings us to the second question: will they trust him or not? Will they run from him or toward him?

Mark wants us to wrestle with the same question. Will I run from him or toward him?

This is what I think is so fascinating about the end of Mark's gospel. Every one of the feeling words in Mark 16 is ambiguous.

They all capture fear in the Hebrew sense. But do they communicate trust or mistrust?

Here's one way to translate these final verses, starting in verse 5:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

But here's another way to translate them:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were utterly astonished and full of wonder.

"Don't be astonished," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Overwhelmed, utterly beside themselves with emotion, and eager to obey – whenever the expression "fear and trembling" is used in the Bible, it always indicates a receptiveness to authority and an eagerness to obey – the women went out. As they ran from the tomb, they said nothing to anyone, because they were filled with awe.

Which was it?

I think God intends for us to join those women in the tomb on that first Easter morning, and to feel their fear, and to wrestle with these questions for ourselves.

How seriously do we take Jesus?

And how much do we trust him?

Worship is a way of ascribing weight or significance to something in our lives. We worship what has weight with us. We worship what we take seriously.

And we worship what we trust implicitly. We worship what find worthy.

As our worship team comes up to lead us in our closing song, before we leave this first century tomb and step back out into the bright light of our busy world that takes nothing seriously and trusts no one, I want to encourage you to take a moment of quiet before God and wrestle with these questions.

What is the thing or person in my life that I take most seriously?

How deeply do I trust that person or thing?

And how deeply is it really deserving of my trust?

To who or what in my life do I ascribe the highest worth?

Closing Song

Do you feel the world is broken?
 Do you feel the shadows deepen?
 But do you know that all the dark won't
 Stop the light from getting through?
 Do you wish that you could see it all made new?
 Is all creation groaning?
 Is a new creation coming?
 Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst?
 Is it good that we remind ourselves of this?

Is anyone worthy? Is anyone whole?
 Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?
 The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave
 He was David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave
 Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
 Of all blessing and honor and glory
 Is He worthy of this?
 He is

Does the Father truly love us?
 (He does)
 Does the Spirit move among us?
 (He does)
 And does Jesus, our Messiah hold forever those He loves?
 (He does)
 Does our God intend to dwell again with us?
 (He does)
 Is anyone worthy?
 Is anyone whole?
 Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?
 The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave
 He is David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave
 From every people and tribe
 Every nation and tongue
 He has made us a kingdom and priests to God
 To reign with the Son
 Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
 Of all blessing and honor and glory
 Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
 Is He worthy of this?
 He is!
 Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
 He is!
 He is!