

Seeds of Amazement

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March 27, 2016 (Easter)

Luke 24:1-12

I am a sports fan, and at points in my life have dreamed of being a sports broadcaster. Whether it's March Madness or the World Series, calling those games would seem like a great challenge and a lot of fun.

What you soon realize is that the best announcers talk the least, and are notably quiet at the biggest moments. That is to say, on Easter Sunday, smart preachers would not say very much, but rather allow the drama and the truth and the power of what we've just heard to do the heavy-lifting, to take you and grab you and re-orient you, just as it has done for generations, just as it did for that very first gathering of witnesses. I will try to demonstrate at least a little bit of that smart-ness this morning.

We hear Luke's version this year – each of the gospels offers a slight variation. Luke is spare and lean. Not much detail and not much interpretation. Jesus has been crucified and buried, and early on the Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, a group of women goes to the tomb to care for the dead body. When they arrive, the stone had been rolled away. No explanation. They do not know what happened, so they entered the tomb itself, and did not find the body. Again, no explanation. They are many things, I am sure, but Luke tells us they are perplexed. That is likely an understatement.

Two men in dazzling clothing suddenly appear. The women move quickly from perplexed to terrified. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they are asked. "He is not here, but has risen..." The men recount what Jesus had said to them earlier, and then the women remember.

Remember, as we did Thursday as he shared his last meal, as we did Friday when we rehearsed his terrible betrayal and trial and death. Remember that remembering matters. It has power.

They remembered, these faithful women, and they left the tomb and told the disciples what had happened.

Faithful women, who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, who were leaders without formal leadership titles, women whom the disciples should have listened to and trusted and believed. The women remembered, and believed, and reported, but they were not believed.

The phrase “idle tale” means that the disciples thought they were concocting the whole thing, making it up.

So Peter went to check it out, and seeing precisely what the women had seen, he believed, and was amazed, we are told. Amazed. We are invited to be the same – perplexed, terrified, remembering, believing, amazed, based on the women’s testimony, then based on our own experience of looking for the living among the dead and experiencing new life, experiencing resurrection.

As many of you know, each year at Third Church has a theme. This year’s theme is a “Year of Sowing.” We have identified different kinds of seeds that are sown, by us, by God, and the ways that they grow. All of the seeds are ultimately seeds of faith, but they take on different qualities and characteristics – seeds of hope, seeds of justice, seeds of love, seeds of reconciliation, and so on and so on.

What struck me this time about the resurrection account of Luke is where it ends up, after all this perplexity and terror. Amazement. Seeds of amazement. Peter is amazed. The women must have been as well, after all was said and done, though we don’t hear that. But we learn that Peter was amazed, and therefore, by extension, so are we.

Rick Morley writes: “Somehow Peter—perhaps because of his experience on the mount of transfiguration, or his sleepy time in the Garden of Gethsemane—was spared the temptation to dismiss the report of the women. Instead of snickering, he went running. And, he found what he probably already knew to be true: the tomb was empty.” And he was amazed.

The word “amazement” hardly captures this, doesn’t it? “Amazing” feels like one of those culturally overused words. A recipe on Food Network with tomatillos or artisan bacon is “amazing.” Stephan Curry’s jump shot, from 35 feet with three defenders hanging all over him, is “amazing.”

Peter’s amazement, and ours, is in another universe of amazement altogether. The word itself in Greek means many things – wonder, and more, marvel, but no word is really up to the task. Words fail when we grasp what has happened, that the powers of death are no more.

Seeds of amazement are difficult to detect at times, or articulate. Our world feels so broken – take Brussels as an example, and our culture seems so fearful, and cynical, and fractured. But when we look, there will be moments when we expect to find death, and instead are amazed to discover an empty tomb.

That’s what I have been doing, looking around. I would encourage you to do the same. Look around for seeds of amazement. Even tiny ones. Fledgling ones, that need cultivation.

Two weeks ago we went to Chicago for the closing service of St. James Presbyterian Church, a small neighborhood church on the city's far north side. For my first five years of ministry, I served as the pastor of St. James Church. Bonny and I were married there and Kenneth was baptized there, and along with those very fond personal memories, I have many, many fond pastoral ones.

The closing service included a service of baptism remembrance – the symbol of the original St. James was a shell, which is a symbol of baptism – and a service of communion.

Afterwards, at a dinner, many people made speeches, kind of like what I imagine a Catholic wake to be. I got up and said, simply, "I'm sorry, and thank you." I'm sorry for whatever I may have inflicted on you as a newbie minister all those years ago, and thank you for all that you taught me, some of which I am smart enough to remember 22-plus years later. "I'm sorry, and thank you."

So it felt like a wake. But it wasn't. The congregation, that faithful remnant, was not entombed in that building. The building, like the tomb, is now empty, and members of the congregation will continue to live out their resurrection faithfulness. A bunch of them are attending churches together until they find a new home, many of them worshipping at the same place even this morning.

There were moments of perplexity and terror along the way. The church broke ground for its building in September 1929, just a month before the Great Depression hit. Nice timing! They gave up their German-speaking service in 1941, probably a good strategic move. They endured a very difficult crisis in pastoral leadership that nobody really knew about until years later. They watched the neighborhood turn from German Protestant to largely Jewish to predominantly Indian and Pakistani.

A story of 87 years of perseverance and resilience, of worship and care, of service to the neighborhood with an after-school program and a community arts academy. So that what we attended two weeks ago was not a funeral for a church, but an Easter service for a community whose history had been marked by many things, but marked primarily with resurrection amazement, the seeds of which will continue to grow from generation to generation.

We saw "To Kill a Mockingbird" at Geva last week. It is difficult to ignore the parallels with our present moment. So I keep thinking about it, which means that it's both at strong work of art and a truth-filled one. Like this morning, it contains ongoing moments of perplexity and terror, and instances of humanity's inordinate capacity to be inhuman, instances which continue to this very moment. But think of other moments, when we look into the tomb and expect to find a body only to discover the stone rolled away and the body gone.

Yes, Tom Robinson is convicted, and later gunned down. We cannot forget that. Yet we cannot forget Scout's speech to Mr. Cunningham, that changed, at least for a moment, the mentality of the mob. And we cannot forget Boo Radley's heroic moment, saving the children, Boo who was deemed beyond the circle of acceptance and was, rather, a target of fear and derision. And we cannot forget Atticus, whose legal heroism is far outshone by his wearied humanity.

Harper Lee died just recently but a seed was certainly planted by her, imperfect, perhaps, yet powerful, that grows, even slowly. Every time a person reads or watches that work and has something stirred within them, how can that be anything but amazing, truly amazing.

So much is suggested in those few spare and lean verses, verses that offer so little explanation but so many trajectories. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Karoline Lewis writes that "...resurrection is not only the promise of life after death, which, after all, would be enough, but also the assurance that the life-giving love of God will always move the stones away. Tombs are just that -- containers for the dead. And while we seem rather content these days with such spaces -- those dead places that fuel corruption, deception, racism, sexism, suspicion, rejection, marginalization, misogyny, judgment, and fear -- God continues to roll those stones away that keep life at bay. And when the stale air of decay meets God's breath that creates new life and the possibility of hope and peace, death truly is no more."

Those are the seeds that are planted, new life and the possibility of hope. And we see glimpses of them all around, if we just look in the right places, if we are just prepared, even every so often, to be amazed.

So let the story be told, without too much interpretation, from a preacher or a cynical culture or a fearful heart. Let the story be told. Listen to the women, then and now. That's generally a smart move. Remember that the rhythm of Thursday and Friday, the rhythm of perplexity and terror, gives way to the rhythm of Sunday morning, the rhythm of remembrance and belief.

Prepare to let seeds of resurrection, love so amazing, bloom and grow in you. Remember, this is not an idle tale. He is not here, but has risen. Amen.