

Easter Sermon: The *Mysterium Tremendum* of the Resurrection

March 31, 2024

Lori Erickson

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” 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.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

And so at last we come to Easter morning. Some of you have traveled through Lent to get here, and some of you are maybe here for the first time, or for the first time in a long time. So let me extend a special welcome this morning to you. If you’re here for the first time, or come once a year, or are here every Sunday, it doesn’t make any difference. This is a time for all of us to celebrate resurrection.

But what does resurrection mean?

First of all, I think it’s important to realize that there are different resurrection narratives in the Gospels, and that we cycle through them in the lectionary. This year we hear the testimony of Mark.

One of the links in all the stories is the presence of Mary Magdalene—which I must say pleases me greatly. In a culture in which women were typically considered inferior, Mary Magdalene was clearly part of the inner circle of the disciples.

Beyond that, each gospel has a slightly different emphasis. John’s version is rich with details, Matthew’s highlights the royal power of Jesus as Messiah, and Luke’s version includes the beautiful story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

But in Mark, we get what might be called the no-frills version of the resurrection—but one that nevertheless has its own forcefulness and power, in part **because** of its brevity.

Scholars believe that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written. By tradition, Mark was believed to have been a disciple of Peter. There's a telling detail in his narrative of the resurrection that supports this theory. The young man in a white robe at the tomb—let's go ahead and call him an angel—tells the women that they should announce to Jesus's "disciples and Peter" that he is going ahead of them to Galilee. Only Mark highlights Peter's name in this way. If you're Peter, it's the sort of detail that gets remembered, one that would have been passed on to Mark. And it's easy to hear a note of gentle forgiveness in this verse, because Peter is the disciple, of course, who denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest.

There are two other details in this story that I want to focus on this morning. One comes at the very end of the passage, in this verse: "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."

So let's just admit that on the surface, this is a downer of an ending. What's more, most Biblical scholars agree that this was the original **ending** of the Gospel of Mark, and that the verses that follow it were added later, to make the ending less abrupt.

But in many ways, I like this ending, because it has the ring of truth. It makes me think of the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum*, which describes the sense of fear evoked by an experience of overwhelming power, majesty and mystery. Philosopher Rudolph Otto, who coined the phrase, identifies it as a key part of religious experiences across millennia, in many faiths.

There are many stories of the *mysterium tremendum* in the Bible. It's why when people encountered God, they often fell to the ground, as Peter, James and John did at the Transfiguration. It's why entering the Holy of Holies in the temple of Jerusalem was a task so solemn, and so fraught with danger, that it was done only by the High Priest on a single day of the year, the Day of Atonement. To tremble with fear and awe is a sign of the greatest respect.

And it's also a sign of humility, because you can't feel arrogant when you're afraid.

All of us know the experience of fear on a more ordinary level, of course. We feel it in the ICU of a hospital, or during a car accident, or when we're consumed by worry over a loved one. We feel it when we wake up at 3 am and can't get back to sleep. These days we often feel it when we read the latest news. Fear is the beast that prowls our minds, our dreams, and our subconscious.

But fear can also be the beginning of transformation, because it's often only after realizing how small and vulnerable we are that we can be open to change. That's what the *mysterium tremendum* is all about.

Think of a person lost in the wilderness at night during a storm, a weary hiker who is stopped in his tracks by a lightning bolt that suddenly illuminates the darkness. He is still frightened, but he can finally see a path forward.

This gives us a sense for what Easter is truly about. It's not about the Easter bunny, or candy, or even a sentimental feeling that well, Jesus suffered a lot, didn't he, but that's all forgotten now that it's Easter.

That's because Easter doesn't **erase** the suffering: it gives **meaning** to the suffering. And it promises us that when we suffer, we are held in the arms of a God who has also suffered.

So let's go back to Mark's bare-bones version of the resurrection. Now let's look at the verse in which the angel tells Mary Magdalene and the other women this: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Note that Jesus is going **ahead** of them to Galilee. He is already on the move, the angel says. He is leading them to where they are to go next.

So here's the next point I want to make this morning: the Resurrection is about **movement**.

Again, on the face of it, it's sort of a disappointment that this is the case. Wouldn't it be easier if a miracle would just fix everything, all at once, and that from that point on everyone lives happily ever after? But that wasn't true for Jesus' resurrection, and it's not true in the resurrections that take place in our lives. There's hard work ahead, which is why Jesus is already on the move. There's going to be loss and grief and pain for the people who followed him. But because of the resurrection, everything is changed.

Think of the image of a stone dropped into a pond, and of the ripples that lead outward. Only in the case of the resurrection, they're not ripples, but a gradually building tsunami, one that utterly changed the ancient world. No one could have predicted that the death of an obscure carpenter in an isolated corner of the Roman Empire would shatter the pagan world. But it did. And it is still changing the world.

Historian Tom Holland has described the theology of the resurrection has a kind of depth charge dropped into the turbulent sea of the Greco-Roman world. The immediate explosion was not felt right away, but the effects of it transformed the western world over the course of the next eleven centuries.

In his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Holland makes no claims about the **truth** of the resurrection, because he says such claims are beyond his scope as a historian. Instead, he focuses on how people **behaved** who believed in the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, he writes what the world was like before Jesus, and what it was like after. His description of the Romans' disregard for human life is especially chilling, including their treatment of slaves, the poor and women. But Christians behaved differently—and those differences spread.

Holland's book makes a persuasive case that even the most seemingly secular movements that originated in the West are fundamentally rooted in Christian principles, including the protection of human rights, humanism, and liberalism.

The Church has often failed to live up to its founding ideals, he writes, but when we judge it for its failures, we invoke Christian teaching and beliefs to do so.

And Holland writes this:

“To be a Christian is to believe that God became man and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal has ever suffered. This is why the cross, that ancient implement of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it—the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe—that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and of the civilization to which it gave birth.”

I love that line about the strangeness of Christianity. It is indeed strange. Holland’s words are a reminder not to domesticate the message of the cross. Some *mysterium tremendum* is entirely in order.

So as we enter into a time of silence, I leave you with two questions: How can your fears be a catalyst for transformation? And this Easter, where is the risen Christ leading you?