Easter Sunday, April 23, 2000
TERROR AND AMAZEMENT
Mark 16:1-8

There's one verse in the Easter story from Mark's gospel that I want you to hear again: "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." (Mark 16:8).

In the New Testament, there are four different versions of what happened on the first Easter Sunday morning. The story in Mark's gospel is considered by most scholars to be the oldest of the four. The other three versions are found in Matthew, Luke, and John. All four agree on one thing: it was only the women followers who dared to venture out to the tomb. All four gospels also agree that it was women who stayed near the cross as Jesus suffered and died on the Friday before Easter. Everyone else was in hiding.

That these women had extraordinary faith is shown in the fact that they went to the tomb, even though they had no idea how they were going to get inside, where the body was, because of a very large stone placed against the opening. How would they move it?

When they got to the tomb, their first surprise was that it had already been moved. When they entered the tomb, their second surprise was seeing a young man sitting there, who told them, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. See for yourself. Go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Then Mark states, as I quoted earlier, "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." End of story. That's it. Mark tells us nothing more in the original version. What a letdown! Where did the women go? Did they ever get up the nerve to tell what they saw? What happened on Monday?

What's most unusual about Mark's story of Easter is that, in its original version, it ends so suddenly. No wonder that by the second century, helpful editors had added a few more verses to the ending of Mark. These later versions of Mark's gospel added supplemental stories because the original version seemed such an abrupt way to conclude. It leaves us wondering.

Matthew says that the women ran back to town and began to tell everything they had seen and heard. Luke says the women ran back and excitedly told everything to the other disciples, adding that the disciples considered the women's testimony an "idle tale." The gospel of John says that only Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, and when she saw that the stone had been removed, she quickly went to tell Peter and John, and they went with her to the tomb. Peter and John looked into the empty tomb and then returned home, but Mary Magdalene stayed there. While she was weeping, Jesus appeared to her.

All of the Easter stories describe fear, disbelief, terror, and amazement among the disciples and others upon hearing the news of the resurrection. The more I've thought about it, I think I understand why. First, let's consider the "terror" aspect, and then the "amazement."

On Friday night before Easter Sunday morning, Pontius Pilate and his advisors went to bed secure in the belief that the man called Jesus would bother them no more. They believed in the power of death. The religious leaders in the city also went to sleep that night, believing that the

power of death had once again done its proper work. The troublemaker, Jesus, was out of the way. Soon, the little movement he started would also die.

Even Jesus' closest followers found themselves trusting more in the power of death than in the message of Jesus. They thought it was all over. It wasn't the first or last time that people were sure that killing someone would solve the problem.

Earlier, when Jesus had made up his mind to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, he sent some of his disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations because he wanted to travel through that area. They reported back that the Samaritans did not want Jesus and his followers to come through their territory or stay overnight. So the disciples proposed a simple solution to their lack of hospitality. They said, "Teacher, why don't you call down fire from heaven and destroy them? Kill them all. That will teach them a lesson." But Jesus would have none of it.

Why is it that we are so tempted, especially in times of difficulty, to worship the power of death? It's the exact opposite of seeing the world through Easter. That's why every year I'm so thankful that so many of you are here on Easter Sunday. It shows that you want to believe there is a better way than killing people to solve the world's problems. It demonstrates that you want to believe that the power of unconditional love, as taught and lived by Jesus, is stronger than the power of a gun or any other weapon of violence or death. Your presence here is an indication that you want to see the world through Easter, even though that goes against some other views of life.

Easter can cause terror in us, as it did in the three women in Mark's story, because nothing is more contrasting than the Good Friday-Easter Sunday events. They had gone to the tomb expecting death, and instead they met life. In one weekend, the experience of the women moved from the scene of death on a cross against a dark sky to a nearby tomb ablaze with light from the early morning sun and the glory of God. The scene runs counter to common-sense human experience. Death is turned into life. That's why Mark's gospel reports, "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them." Later, when other followers of Jesus got the news, they had the same reaction. They were scared, terrified.

They had good reason to experience terror. Because of the Easter event, their view of life and death, their understanding of God and how God works in the world, was contradicted. It's not easy to quickly change one's point of view, one's understanding of God and how God works in the world, and how we are to relate to each other. It's always terrifying to have your point of view challenged, no matter what the subject. Remember how terrified the church was of Galileo's discoveries. There are those today who are frightened by the teaching of evolution. The list could go on and on.

It's also possible that some people were more content with Jesus being dead. At least they could count on him being in one place. Throughout Mark's gospel, especially, there is this breathless, ceaseless account of Jesus moving about here and there. There is no time to catch one's breath, take stock, figure things out, sit back, and reflect. And Jesus, before the resurrection, even said something like that — he said God's Spirit is like the wind: you never quite know where it's coming from or where it's going, or whether it will increase in intensity or calm down. It can't be controlled or tamed.

On the other hand, there's a kind of satisfaction in life when things are nailed down and mostly predictable. We are born, we grow, we go to school, get a job, maybe get married and have children, then grandchildren, we grow old, we die.

There are times when we may dream of something more, something beyond the known and the empirically assured, yet at the same time, we take comfort in knowing what to expect. We like small surprises, but not the big ones that challenge what we've always believed.

So when the three women found the tomb empty, they were afraid. Life is not predictable. Tomorrow can be better than today. Progress is possible. History is not circular. You do not know it all. Many of our beliefs can be called into question.

I believe Mark never got around to putting the finishing touches on his Easter story because the whole point of the empty tomb is that the story is open-ended. Easter is a verb in the present tense. We have to complete the story in our own lives. Jesus is always going on before us. The power of his life and teachings can't be sealed up in a tomb. He is in Galilee. He is in Lincoln. He is in places you least expect to find him. He is in you and me. He will not stay nailed to a cross or remain locked in creeds, theologies, or christologies. And that's what connects the terror and the amazement.

We know that something amazing happened to the followers in the days and weeks after Easter. They experienced the most essential part of his presence with them, no matter where they were. They had new energy and power.

Before, they had seen him heal, preach, and cast out demons, but they had regarded these powers as solely his. That power had always been in them — and in us as well — but while he was alive, they saw those powers as being only in him. Now, after Easter, it dawned on them that Jesus himself had taken up full residence in them. Before the resurrection, he had been in one place at a time; now he was everywhere at once. They couldn't predict where he might show up.

After the resurrection, the disciples remembered that Jesus had told them in the upper room at their last meal together, "Truly, truly, I say to you, those who believe in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will they do." That's cause for amazement.

Terror and amazement were the first responses on Easter. Gradually, the terror subsided, and the amazement grew — and it continues to grow and expand.

Easter is cause for amazement because it reveals a new way of seeing and understanding all of creation. Reality is dynamic, not static. Creation is not some kind of large machine that runs in the same old ways and ruts. Rather, all of creation is open, expanding, evolving, and it is only partly predictable. Just when we think all things are going one way, something completely new breaks in.

Easter tells us that life is amazing. On one level, it means that there is something eternal about life — not only the life of Jesus, but your life and mine — that transcends even death. Death is not the ultimate power.

The more I understand what's so amazing about Easter, the more I am sure that there is a message to people in it about what God is doing in daily life here and now, as people walk, talk, eat, celebrate, suffer, and rejoice. Easter is the story of how disheartened, unnerved, existing people became hopeful, creative, loving people, unafraid of anything that life or death had to offer. And that is still happening to people every day.

Easter is amazing because it reminds us that we live in a world where God and God's love cannot be eliminated. When we are convinced that we have God in a box, in a tomb, on a cross, or defined and explained in a creed or doctrine, God's love breaks out where we least expected it.

Consider how amazing that is. God is in the power of love that conquers hate. God is in the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed human beings to know that they have the right to freedom and dignity. God is in the holiness we experience when we have given love and received it in return.

Easter is terrifying and amazing. It tells us that we human beings have an eternal glory with God, and that in the long run, what we see as social status, rank, nationality, race, charm, wealth, fame — all the qualities by which we like to judge others and ourselves — are in God's realm irrelevant. Now that's good news. Go out and celebrate. Amen.