

**Sermon: Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016 Luke 24**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Years ago I worked in a school office and one of my tasks was to produce a daily bulletin, to inform everyone of the important stuff happening that day and in the coming days. In order to keep people reading what could be pretty dull information, I would toss in several items each day that were either funny or outright false, and before long that daily bulletin, known as “The Soup” went from seldom-read to eagerly-awaited. One of my personal favourites was the day when I took the staff photo, closed my eyes and tried to forget everyone’s name and everything I knew about them, then opened my eyes, looked at the photo as if for the first time and quickly wrote down new names for everyone, based only on my first impressions of them from that photo. So Lori became Bernice, Vicki became Natasha, Rick became Pedro. Some staff members liked their new names, some just hated theirs, and at least one stuck around as a new nickname.

In some ways, this is the challenge for every preacher on Easter Sunday: how to forget what we think we know about a story that is almost too well-known to us, in order for it to say something new? How do we squeeze our eyes closed long enough, that when we open our eyes again we see what’s going on, as if for the first time?

This year I looked at Luke’s version of the resurrection in this way: literally closing my eyes, praying for a bit of guidance, then opening my eyes to see if anything leapt off the page of the New Revised Standard Version. And what sprung forward, almost instantly, were two key words that will be our guides. The two words, are **PERPLEXED** and **AMAZED**.

Luke 24: 2-4 – They [the women] found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup> While they were **perplexed** about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them...

Luke 24: 10-12 - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them...told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, **amazed** at what had happened.

**Perplexed** and **Amazed**. Those two words pretty much sum up my spiritual life these days, each word keeping the other in proper tension. Perplexed digs around with questions, Amazed transcends the answers. Perplexed gives me roots, Amazed gives me wings. In their original setting, perplexed and amazed gave the early Church what it needed, in those early days of figuring out what to say about this man Jesus of Nazareth.

**PERPLEXED** is such a great word, dating back to the King James Version, for it touches both heart and mind. “Perplexed” implies that your rational abilities don’t know what’s going on and your gut wants to get to the bottom of it. This is no casual curiosity, this is bugging you and you will persist in seeking the truth until some satisfactory explanation is offered.

**AMAZED** is a great big word. Amazed is more than affirmed, or encouraged, or uplifted, or any other mildly-positive words. Amazed is more than a thumbs-up; Amazed is eyes wide open and jaw dropped to the ground, and for those of us who have been around the story of Jesus all our lives, it’s good to remember what it’s like to be amazed.

So back we go to the gospel of Luke. Lovingly going back to the tomb to attend to the body of their murdered friend, Jesus, the women were perplexed at his whereabouts – and then visited by the most surprising, amazing guests, telling them that Jesus had been risen from the dead, just like he said he would.

Rushing to share the news – as one does when experiencing the kind of “thin space” moment variously described as a “vision” or “angel visitant” or “ecstatic religious experience” - imagine the disappointment at not being believed. In the words of Luke 24: 11, “these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they [the disciples] did not believe them [the women].” While women in the early Church were generally treated with respect, that appears not to have been the case this time. Seminary President Dr. Michael Joseph Brown puts it like so:

*“We have [here] an untold number of women -- three who are named -- experiencing an event beyond normal human comprehension and their testimony being dismissed by men, who seem to fall into the same old pattern that attended ancient male-dominated societies.*

*“Human history is rife with such overt discrimination. Less than a century ago, women and people of color were not considered credible witnesses in American courts. The history of civil rights in the United States is replete with examples of women and men whose truthfulness was discounted or disregarded because an accident of birth made them something other than white men. In short, certain people throughout history, simply because of gender or ethnicity, have been branded deceitful and lacking in credibility for no other reason than prevailing social prejudices.”*

There is much here to pay attention to, in Dr. Brown’s words about whose words we accept, and whose we dismiss. I’ll let you fill in the blanks about the specific intersection between his words, and a certain high-profile court case that came to verdict this past week, but I am going to comment on our general tendency to dismiss things we hear from people we perceive as “different from us.” If you are of a different religion or ethnicity from the majority, if you’re from another part of the country or an opposing political viewpoint, your opinion might be dismissed without even being heard. Different age groups have a really hard time hearing one another. And one more thing: I see a rapidly-evolving social prejudice, that mocks and dismisses any experience – like the one that the female disciples expressed so long ago - that cannot be measured by conventional means.

I see this happening on two fronts: first, is in the area of alternative healing modalities. If you want to experience some truly disrespectful dialogue, wander onto a website where someone is speaking of the life-changing impact on their life of eastern medicine, or alternative therapies, or even prayer. At best, it gets dismissed as quickly as all the male disciples except Simon Peter tuned out Mary and Joanna and Mary Magdalene; at worst there are full-out attacks on the personhood of the one who dared to say, “I was in pain and now I feel better.”

The other place I see this, is one that I personally absorb every time I am foolish enough to wade into the “comments” section of online news sites. As a person of faith, I am decimated by the violence that is enacted in the name of God on a daily basis. My soul grieves at a double depth at the loss of life in a transit hub in Belgium, on the streets of Yemen, and at a soccer stadium in Iraq; for in addition to my sorrow I always have at the loss of life, I also grieve each time the name of God, the one whose love claims and fills my life, gets used to justify terror. Just don’t try saying that online; for when a person of faith does come forward to offer prayers and condolences for the loss of others, they are mocked in a manner befitting the soldiers standing at the foot of the cross: our God is deemed “imaginary,” our sacred story is a “fairy tale,” our motive is either conceit or greed. There’s not really much that can be done to answer that, because even the most well-reasoned reply will be denigrated by the social pre-judgment against anything spiritual.

We, like the women at the tomb, have a hard time being regarded as credible when “religion” has become such a loaded word. But rather than being defeated by the skepticism of others, there is a greater point I want to make here: that is, **the importance of letting ourselves be perplexed**, no matter how that might look. Easter is the day when I celebrate the amazement

of resurrection – the rising of Christ above the religious and political forces that did their best to subdue him, and the victory of all people who prevail against the powers and principalities who try to diminish their personhood. But even as I celebrate how amazing that is, much of my daily living is spent not in amazement but perplexity, as I wonder about the world I live in, as I ask deep questions about the reality of God and Christ, and as I grapple with those parts of scripture that just don't add up. God does amaze me, but the amazement is not the result of my questions having been solved; the amazement arrives as a gift of grace, even while I remain totally perplexed about a lot of it.

Fortunately, some excellent guides along the way have encouraged us to respect the importance of our perplexed questioning. Rather than fearing the lack of certainty, many scholars, authors and clergy assure us that **we can be both questioner and disciple at the same time**. Asking the questions, being perplexed, can propel us forward, and the occasional flashes of amazement we encounter along the way spur us to ask more and better questions. Many people here at Ralph Connor have been particularly indebted to the work of John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg, who distinguished between “the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith”, helping us to tease out the difference between what happened at the time and what it came to mean later. This helpful tension, between the historic events of then and the lived faith of now, is similar to the tension between being perplexed and being amazed: we wonder aloud about the events of Jesus' life, while expressing gratitude for those times when we have known the presence of the risen Christ beside us on the road.

And so, we keep walking that path of faith, and we keep wondering. Amazing assurances of faith touch our hearts, even as our perplexed minds formulate the next set of questions. And in that spirit, I close today's message, not with declarative statements of faith, but with a series of questions that are spurred by our amazement, asked by Rev. Kate Matthews of our partner denomination in the USA, the United Church of Christ:

*“Has anything ever happened in your life, or the life of your church, that seemed too good to be true? Have you ever received news so good that it required a re-appraisal of your worldview? What evidence did you need in order to trust in the good news? What did you need to “see” in order to “go tell”? This was the moment that changed the world, and, hopefully, our expectations, even today, two thousand years later. Where do you stand in a world made new by the events of Easter Sunday so long ago? Where does your church stand in such a world? What, then, will you do?”*

What a great question to sum it up: in response to the Good News of Jesus Christ, what, then, will we do? As that question of faith and action starts to percolate in us, let us lift our voices in singing today's Heritage Hymn, “When Morning Gilds the Skies” (VU 339)

References cited:

Brown, Michael Joseph.

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2819](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2819)

Matthews, Kathryn M. (includes quotes from Borg and Crossan)

[http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_march\\_27\\_2016#Easter](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_march_27_2016#Easter)

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