

“Photophobia”

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March 31, 2024

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 him. 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 Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Light and Life, we praise you this day, for the promise in this celebration. For in you, death is conquered, and in you hope is found. We pray that the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead would be at work within us and alongside us, guiding us forward, opening our ears and opening our eyes to see the Word risen and triumphant. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Twelve years ago, a man named Chad was in a horrible wreck. His car was hit by another, and his injuries were serious to say the least. Physically the broken bones were set, the cuts stitched up, and bruises healed. But deeper issues emerged. The wreck had caused deep neurological damage, and Chad couldn't stand to be in the light. Just to leave the house, he had to wear sunglasses, a sun hat, and a scarf, because he could not be out in the sunlight for even five seconds without intense pain. So he lived alone, at home, in darkness.

Chad's condition was an extreme case of what is known as photophobia, an intense sensitivity to light. I'm guessing any number of you, upon glancing at the sermon title thought this was a sermon about being someone being afraid to have their picture taken. That's a good guess. But no. It's a medical term, really referencing not a fear, per se—that's what *phobia* means, after all—but extreme sensitivity to light, for which the Greek term is *photo: photo-phobia*.

I and some who are related to me have something in the same vein. Nothing at the scale that Chad suffered from, mind you. In fact, I'm not sure what I deal with even counts as photophobia. It's more an amusing nuisance. I sneeze at the sun. I walk from inside a building out into a sunny day, and I don't get my sunglasses on fast enough, I'm going to sneeze.

There's a medical term for this too: "photic sneezing." Yes, it's a real thing. Has something to do with the nerves to your eyes and your nose, so your eyes get really stimulated, say by going outside on a sunny day, it'll trigger the nose nerve, and you'll sneeze, a time or three. It's got a longer name too. Autosomal-dominant Compelling Helio-Ophthalmic Outburst, which if you were following along closely spells out the unfortunate acronym ACHOO, which I don't think is funny at all.

Turns out it's genetic too. If you really want to see something funny, after church one day, wait around for the Howells to go out to the car, Frances, me, and the three kiddos. And as we all step out of the church building into the sunlight, one by one, the three rugrats and I will inevitably sneeze within about twenty seconds of each other. Frances has been mercifully spared this affliction.

Many years ago, when the sun had risen one day, three women went out into the light determined, but were nonetheless alarmed at what they discovered. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome set out to anoint the body of Jesus. Nothing to suggest that they suffered from photophobia or even that they had been sneezing. But what they saw in the light did scare them.

Upon entering the tomb, they see a young man dressed in a white robe. And they were alarmed. This mysterious figure tries to reassure them, saying, "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."

And it was empty. So many possibilities here. Maybe it was graverobbers, or maybe the chief priests, or maybe the Romans. Or, and this was a long shot, what if this mysterious, frightening figure in the tomb was telling the truth, and Jesus has been raised?

If that were true, well it strained belief. What would it mean? It would mean a new world; a whole new reality had emerged. It meant not only that Jesus was alive, but that everything he had said about himself was true. And if everything he had said about himself was true, then they were living in peak times, creation-shifting times, when a new reality, a new kingdom was bursting forth.

They might not have thought about all that, because they really didn't have much time. The mysterious figure robed in white then told them to go and tell the rest of the disciples this news and that Jesus would meet them ahead in Galilee.

And then, the final verse says, filled with joy and steeled with resolve, the women strode confidently out of the tomb back to the disciples, declaring to them the good news of Jesus' resurrection, and together they went forth in mission and witness.

Or wait, that's not what it says at all. The final verse says, "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 END.

That's how it ends. The women running away from the tomb terrified, seized by fear. Now you know I usually try to be one for good grammar, but Greek dabbles in double negatives often enough, and even though if it's against the rules in English, this is one instance in which I say to heck with the rules, just say what it says straight up. It closes with, "They didn't say nothing to nobody, because they were afraid." And that's it. That's how it ends.

But your gut reaction may be, "The end? That's not the end. What about all the meetings, all the appearances, the Great Commission, touch my hands, my feet? All that?" All good stuff. Just in other Gospels. "But I'm looking in the Bible right now, and there's more stuff right afterward."

Some of you may already know about this, or if you look closely in your Bibles you may see a few footnotes that tell you this. The oldest, most reliable manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark don't go to a verse nine or all the way to a verse twenty, but end right here after v. 8. If any of you want to know more about textual criticism and manuscript variance and all that, I love talking about it, so let's talk more. But fast forward to the end of it, after balancing all the evidence, the most likely situation is that Mark deliberately ended the Gospel, this good news of Jesus Christ, with those jarring, unsettling words, "They didn't say nothing to nobody, because they were afraid."

Now you might be thinking, "Good news? Good news? How is that possibly good news?" It sure doesn't sound like good news. Think about it some more, it gets even worse. In Mark's telling of Christ's final few days, he is systematically abandoned by all those closest to him. So that when he hangs on the cross, he does so alone. But there at a distance, Mark tells of these same three women looking on. Even while the other disciples fled, these women remained.

Now the other Gospels tell the story a different way, with more things afterward, but think of it this way. The Gospel of Mark is probably the earliest one written, so for any number of listeners in the early church, this is how they heard the story of Jesus: everyone closest to Jesus

fleeing in fear. Even at the end, the story of light and hope and the tomb being empty, the last of his faithful followers run away in fear, back into the darkness.

It was understandable. It was the unknown; it was startling; it was terrifying. The darkness can feel much more comforting.

Another person felt the push back into the darkness, another person suffering from that medical condition photophobia. There was a woman just a few years ago who suffered from nearly constant migraine headaches that were brought on by sunlight. Even to venture outside, she had to wear a mask over her eyes, or only to go out at night. Otherwise, she confined herself to her home, living in darkness, the windows covered, all lights and lamps unplugged, with the only light she used being a small camping light just for illumination in the bathroom. For more than two years, she lived in nearly complete darkness.

The measures she took were understandable, given the pain she would endure otherwise, but she started to realize the toll it was taking on her. When she finally got help, they discovered that because she had been living in nearly complete darkness for so long, she had developed other conditions. The blood flow to her brain was irregular; her sight deteriorated; and her eyes would shake violently.

The light was intensely painful, and it was understandable that she was afraid to go out into it, but in the long run she realized the darkness was worse.

For how many of us, even this very day, does that step out into the light feel painful, fearful? I'm of course not just talking about headaches and migraines and sensitivity to sunlight. How many of you have sensed a step into newness, newness of life, newness of faith, a step out of the shadows of your soul into something brighter, but you didn't take it? Even for understandable reasons. Maybe you've stepped out before or tried to, only to get burned or blinded. Or maybe like the women at the tomb, you stepped out into the new morning but were terrified at what you saw.

Whatever the reason, a choice many make is to stay in the darkness. It's an understandable thing to do. It feels safer. But like the woman with her home blacked out realized, the darkness is worse, and only later do we realize the deeper toll it takes.

If you've been with us over this Lenten season, we've talked a good bit about the fear of the next step. We were with Israel in the wilderness, and the very reason they were there was precisely because they were afraid of what it would mean for them to step into a new land, a new identity, a new life as God's people. They preferred the desert; they preferred the darkness.

And even going forward, starting next week as we look at some of the exciting things before us as a church, we'll look at how over and over the church, the global church, has been faced with the challenge, the calling to step forward in faith into a new life, a renewed mission, and how over and over the church has gone forward despite the fact that doing so was scary.

So as we return to the women at the tomb and this unsettling ending to the Gospel, with even the last stalwart followers running away in fear, not telling nothing to nobody, we wonder, how is this possibly reassuring to a church called to take a similar leap of faith, how is this possibly comforting to someone sensing a step out into the light, a step toward faith, a step toward Christ, how is this possibly good news?

Imagine with me for a moment, that a long time ago, you're new among some of these early Christians, say about thirty to forty years into the church's life—that's around when it's thought that this Gospel was written. You've heard the stories of Jesus maybe piecemealed together. You've seen this ragtag community of faith at work, but it's still new.

And then you gather to hear this account, this written account of the life of this Jesus whom this group seeks to follow so closely. You've never heard it all put together like this, all in one place. You hear of the miracles, the teachings. You hear Jesus' promises that any who would seek to follow him can be sure of any number of similar hardships. And yet you hear this assurance that a kingdom, a new kingdom, would be growing, a new life, a new reality would be ushered in.

Then the story goes into its final movements, with this Jesus handed over, abandoned by all who followed him, and killed. But then just as you think hope would emerge on that day when the sun rose over the empty tomb, it says his last followers who had stuck with him, even they run away in fear, and then the story ends.

That's what you hear, and you wonder, how is that possibly good news?

And then you start looking around. You realize that even though that telling of the story ended with the understandable flight out of fear, it obviously didn't stop there. Even though that telling of the story ended with them not telling nothing to nobody, they obviously at some point overcame that fear and took that next step. You know this for a fact, because you see around you proof after proof of others standing there who had heard that news, who had seen the testimony that a new kingdom, a new reality, a new life was at work within the world, who had stepped into that life, that hope, centered around this Jesus who was risen.

And then you start to wonder whether that light that you were so afraid of really might be something after all, and you start to wonder whether that darkness that you had thought was so comfortable really might not be so great.

As it turns out, that woman who had lived in the darkness for over two years did in fact come back into the light, so to speak. Same with that guy Chad, for that matter. It took a long time and a lot of treatment, but her condition resolved completely. And it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been willing to take that first fearful step.

Just two days ago, we were coming out of the Good Friday service that we hold in the Chapel. Many of you have come to that. It's in the middle of the day, and y'all remember Friday, like the rest of this weekend, a bright, beautiful day. But the Chapel, it's darkened. We put sheets on the stained-glass windows. We cut the lights. And only the flicker of candlelight and the piercing of a few gleams of light around the sheets can be seen in the space. It's dark, and deliberately so.

But after the service, we come out into the parking lot, out into the bright sun. The three Howell kids and I of course sneezed on the way to the car. And as we got to the car, Frances and I chatted briefly with Susan King. Many of you know Susan.

And Susan was commenting on the power of the service we had all that shared, but then she shared, there out in the parking on that bright, sunny day, "It's jarring coming out into the light."

It certainly is. The light of new life is a jarring, even frightening thing. But it is so much better. So take the next step, friends. Come out of the shadows, and find that the light and life in this risen Jesus really does conquer whatever fear might bind you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.