***SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: BE AWED!***

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Text: Luke 24:1-35

When were you last totally awed by something? When were you left speechless (which is perhaps a miracle in itself for some of you) or when were you filled to overflowing with amazement? As I have mentioned before, when our son Dan was born, the doctor offered us the option of having me catch him, with the doctor’s hands securely wrapped around mine. When the time came for Dan to enter the world, Karen graciously (though that is perhaps not exactly the right word in that moment) consented and I had the joy of catching Dan as he slid into the world. As he was arriving, my biggest concern was that I would pull his head off as he was easing into my hands, despite the doctor’s assurances that would not happen. (It didn’t.) As I stood there with his wiggly wet body in my hands, I was so filled with awe at the wonder of this new life I was holding that it was not until the nurse said, ‘It’s a boy!” that I noticed and said, “Oh, yeah!”

I remember entering a meadow in the dark of night at a sports camp in upstate New York and seeing more stars above me than I had ever imagined, a sight that stunned me and etched a vision in my 18 year-old mind’s eye that I can still see 45 years later. I remember standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon with friends from Scotland and hearing Morag say in a hushed tone, “*When we get back home, friends will say, ‘What was it like?’ and I will say, ‘There are no words to describe it.*’” That was my impression too the first time I saw it, and the second and the third. Maybe you too have had that experience at the Grand Canyon or perhaps it is some other canyon or mountain or starry, starry night that took your breath away for a moment or left you speechless because words were totally inadequate to describe what you were feeling. Have you ever been so awed by anything?

In our 21st century world, such awe-filled moments risk becoming rarer as we become inured to awe by scientific explanations that give us all the mundane details of what we are seeing and by the deluge of improbable images that pass before our eyes on screens day to day? Is there anything that really awes you these days? And more pertinently this Easter Sunday, are you awed at all by Jesus’ resurrection or is it to you just another Bible story with a happy ending?

Resurrection is a little hard for us to grasp, as it probably should be. Even the gospel writers tell us nothing of Jesus’ resurrection itself, just the accounts of his crucifixion, death, and burial, and then the empty tomb and encounters with the risen Lord. What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but whatever happened in the tomb at the moment of Jesus’ resurrection stayed in the tomb, even if he did not. In his book *The Day the Revolution Began*, New Testament scholar Tom Wright tries to help us understand what it meant to the gospel writers who told the story:

*’Resurrection’…meant a new bodily life after a period of being bodily dead…This new body seemed to be equally at home in the two interlocking dimensions of created reality, what the Bible calls ‘heaven’ and ‘earth,’ that is, God’s space and our space*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

We are fairly familiar with our space and how things work within it; in that realm dead things stay dead. The raising of Lazarus was an exception, a miraculous event that happened within our time and space – more a resuscitation than a resurrection, for Lazarus would eventually die again. But Jesus’ resurrection crosses that boundary from our time and space into God’s time and space – moving from earth to heaven and back again – and it is much more difficult for us to grasp that concept. As Frederick Buechner puts it:

*[Resurrection] is entirely unnatural. Man does not go on living beyond the grave because that’s how he is made. Rather, he goes to his grave as dead as a doornail and is given his life back again by God (i.e., resurrected) just as he was given it by God in the first place, because that is the way God is made.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Resurrection is not really about us. It is about God and what God does, because as we are told again and again in the pages of Scripture, nothing is impossible for God! What God does is create life, renew life, and give life to those for whom life no longer seems possible. Resurrection is the creative work of the God who created all things in the beginning and creates anew for a new beginning in God’s heavenly space.

In describing heaven and God’s Kingdom, Jesus uses parables, perhaps because that is the only way to come close to our understanding it; John of Patmos uses spectacular, creative imagery to describe it in Revelation, perhaps because he wants us to appreciate more than anything else how awesome it is. In every respect what is described is worthy of unsurpassed awe which is far more important than our understanding of it. But are you awed by it anymore? Or to put it another way, are you awed by God anymore?

Those who were at the tomb that Easter morning were filled with awe, while those who were only told about it were highly skeptical. You heard it in Luke’s account this morning. The women arrive at the tomb at dawn’s early light to anoint Jesus’ dead body only to find that the stone is rolled away, the body is missing, and a couple of angels are hanging around with the stunning message: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen*.” Jesus had told them that he would rise on the third day, but somehow none of them recalled those hope-filled words amid the trauma of his crucifixion. None of them rushed to the tomb that morning to see if he had risen. Yet when the angel reminded the women of what he had said, they remembered and rushed back to tell the other disciples what they had seen and heard and thus believed. Peter ran to the tomb and confirmed what they had said, apart from the encounter with the angels, and his response according to Luke was amazement at what had happened – though it is not clear just what he understood to have happened. But for all those who did not go to the tomb and just heard the story the women told, Jesus’ resurrection seemed nothing but an idle tale. Perhaps they were unwilling to get their hopes up, or perhaps their feet were too firmly grounded in this world to imagine that something like resurrection could happen. We don’t know. But the contrast is striking – awe for those who went to the tomb and found it empty, high skepticism for those who stayed at home and simply heard the story.

Two thousand years later we gather to hear the story yet again, having never seen the empty tomb for ourselves, having never heard the voice of an angel, having never walked side by side with the risen Lord, having only heard the reports of others, and thus the question for us is: Are we any less skeptical than those who heard the story on that first Easter but considered it an idle tale? Are we any more awed, any more hopeful, any more confident in the reality of resurrection than were those who did not see the empty tomb for themselves? As Fleming Rutledge suggests in her book *The Undoing of Death*:

*God did not make the risen Lord manifest to all the people, just to those he had chosen to be witnesses…. So, it follows that there will be many people who will come to church on Easter morning and see the flowers* *and hear the music and even receive Communion and still never see the risen Lord.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

Are you among those who believe where you have not seen, those who find yourself awed not only by the story that is told, but by the truth of the story, the reality of the Resurrection, and the power of the God who could raise Jesus from the dead? Or will you leave as a skeptic, having sung the hymns, but never meeting the risen Lord?

Those two followers of Jesus who walked with him on the Emmaus Road were skeptics until Jesus sat at table with them and broke the bread; then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Is that what it will take for you to believe and be awed by the resurrection – to break bread at table with the risen Lord and there to recognize him as the one who walked into worship with you this day? Or might you come to this table already knowing that he is risen, believing that he is risen, awed by his resurrection and by his promise of your resurrection too? For our joy this day is not just the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection 2,000 years ago; it is our celebration of the ongoing reality of the risen Lord who reigns forever and the hope-filled promise that with his resurrection, death does not have the last word in our lives either. God’s last word for us is life, life in the face of death, life that spans heaven and earth, life from the hand of the same God who has given us life and called us children! As our friend Jim Simpson writes:

*The resurrection is not just a historical fact, it is truly good news for those who want to stay on their feet and keep going when life tumbles in.*[[4]](#endnote-4)

In so many places in our world, life has tumbled in – with COVID surges and pandemic exhaustion, with a brutal war in Ukraine, with devastating droughts and floods and storms, with the death of a spouse or friend or parent, with a dire diagnosis, with tragedies or challenges that have strained our days and haunted our nights. It is for those days, for these days, that we recall and proclaim as true the good news of resurrection. Skeptics will call it fake news. But we call it gospel, good news, for we believe what the women saw and heard, what those on the Emmaus Road experienced, what a host of disciples saw for themselves, what generations of Christians have proclaimed: Jesus Christ is risen! Brothers and sisters, believe that good news! Be in awe of that good news! Let the alleluias resound from these walls, throughout this city and county, and across our lives in a joyful chorus of praise! For, this is the day of resurrection! This is a day to be awed! Alleluia! Amen

1. N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, HarperOne:2016, pp.175-176 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row:1973, p.42 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans: 2002, p.301 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Very Rev. Dr. James A. Simpson, “When Life Tumbles In”, *Life and Work* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)