

April 20th: Amazed By Hope

Welcome, my friends, our April miniseries called “Looking for Light.” The goal of this mini series is to prepare our souls for the final weeks of Lent, and to prepare for these holy days of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. And now we’ve made it, Easter is here! In these four weeks, we’ve been taking a closer look at some passages from the Gospel of Luke and then meditating on what those stories might mean for us as we search for hope in our modern context. We could all use some hope right now, no matter our age, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, or life experience—so I hope that these thoughts will bring you closer to peace.

Next week, Pastor Heather will conclude this miniseries with a meditation from the Book of Hebrews, so plan to join us for that as well. And then in the month of May, we’ll go back to our series on Soulcare, and wrap up those conversations on mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing—so if those topics have made an impact on you, we look forward to processing those insights together and sharing in some final reflections.

Before we get started, let’s pray together.

Risen Lord, we join your faithful disciples at the tomb, looking for any hope to hold onto in these dark days. Like our spiritual ancestors, we come heavy with burdens and worries, full of anxiety about the future, we are weary. In these tender and vulnerable moments, you surprise us with news that is beyond our comprehension—you amaze us in ways that captivate our souls. Remind us of this amazing miracle this morning, so that we might also be resurrected into new ways of living and being that fill us with hope. Amen.

When was the last time you were amazed? Like really, truly, deeply amazed? Not when you said some new recipe was amazing, or when you called the movie you watched awesome—but when your soul felt absolutely dazzled or captivated by something?

I’ll give you a few minutes to think about it, and while you reflect, I’ll tell you about the memory that comes to mind for me.

During my month of Renewal Leave, I decided to spend a week at the Oregon coast, with the goal of doing some State Park exploring and some spiritual practices that would hopefully replenish my mental and emotional health. It might have been slightly foolish to have a beach vacation in February, but nevertheless, I trekked down Highway 101 in search of some peace and quiet. On one of the days, I was driving south towards the little town of Cannon Beach, and it was surprisingly sunny—not warm at all, but still gloriously sunny. As I was navigating these winding coastal roads, I turned a corner and was suddenly given a glimpse of the most beautiful vista—and there was a viewpoint just a few hundred yards off, so I immediately abandoned my plans to keep driving and pulled into this parking lot alongside the cliffs.

If you know me, you know I like a plan and spontaneity can be tough for me—I'm just not big on surprises, but I knew that I couldn't let this gorgeous moment pass me by. I had to stop, I had to see more. And what I saw was breathtaking—the sunlight pouring over the mountains, the distant sound of waves crashing, the feeling of being the only person for miles around to see this perfect sight. Because I was alone—apparently nobody else wanted to take a beach vacation in February—and so I didn't have anyone to share this experience with. I took a few photos, which didn't quite do the vista justice, and I texted them to my mom and dad—but there wasn't anyone physically there that I could share this amazement with.

There were a few more moments like this during my travels, little glimpses of awe that I tried to capture and store away inside of me because they felt so precious—and I started to notice that these experiences of being dazzled happened a lot more when I was outside of my normal routine. In a new place, my mind was more receptive to these feelings of amazement, because it felt special in a way that my usual habits and activities didn't. I know it was a privilege to be away and to take this time, and so my soul was soaking up every last bit of this sudden freedom—and it made me more attuned to opportunities that I might not have seen otherwise. I was more open to being amazed, and I think that was important.

Now, as you think about your own recent experience, and reflect on whether or not you've felt a sense of awe in the past few weeks or months, let me just say that if nothing is immediately coming to mind, you're probably not alone. Our cultural language uses words like amazing and awesome on a regular basis, but I tend to think that we have a distinct lack of amazement and awe in our daily lives. We live in a world of constant innovation that would have been unthinkable to our ancestors from just a century or two ago, and yet, we are very rarely impressed by the novelty and advancement that is a regular part of our routines. We might even feel bored on a regular basis, because the rhythm that we've created for ourselves can be so devoid of true joy or meaningful connection. We might ask ourselves, "is this all there is to life? Is there any more to human existence than just work, eat, sleep, and repeat?"

I actually think we're starved for real amazement—but we don't always know it. I didn't even know how hungry I was for these experiences until I had them—and it made me desperate for more. I think we're all longing for true awe, but we can't articulate it, so we substitute in feelings like shock or surprise and we choose activities that bring simple entertainment and amusement. I think we're looking to be captivated and astonished, but we end up scrolling our phones hoping for the next brief hit of dopamine, before that cycle continues again and again and again.

But the lack of amazement in our lives takes a toll. Not just mentally and emotionally, but spiritually as well. When we don't have those moments of deep wonder and joy, we can feel like our ordinary lives and regular routines are meaningless, just carrying us from one day to the next without any sort of purpose. We can feel like we've lost our way, with nothing to look forward to, nothing to celebrate, nothing to be thankful for. I can admit to feeling this way too—I fell into a pattern of being so exhausted and overwhelmed that I neglected this profound desire within me—I was just going through the motions in a lot of ways.

I realize that not everyone can take just take a week to travel and explore the Oregon Coast, or even take a full day to do something spontaneous—that's just

not the reality of most people, and that's certainly not my reality now that I'm back in my normal work rhythm, but I do think that amazement is still a worthwhile pursuit. And that's because true amazement is a life changing experience. True amazement is so powerful that it overwhelms us in a good way, it silences the cacophony of thoughts in our minds for just a moment so that we can fully focus on the awe in front of us. True amazement gives us a brief reprieve from the uncertainty and anxiety we might feel, it's a feeling that can reconnect us to the larger mystery and beauty in our world that we might otherwise ignore.

But what does this have to do with Easter? Why talk about amazement on this special day?

Well, I happen to think that our story from the Gospel of Luke is an example of a moment of deep amazement—it's an experience that defies all of our expectations and beliefs. It's a story that invites us into suspending all of our doubts and preconceived notions about how the world works—it forces us to examine the feelings of cynicism, hopelessness, or even fear that might be lurking in our hearts. It's a story that can captivate us if we let it, because it can be a source of hope and light that we desperately need in our broken world.

So let's go back and listen to a few of these verses again.

At the beginning of our story, we hear this: "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." That seems curious, but not necessarily a cause for amazement just yet—since these women likely presumed that something else had happened to Jesus' body. But then, the women do experience something that is out of the ordinary, and so our story continues, "While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!

Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”

Despite Jesus’ attempts to convince his followers about this prophecy, and his coming resurrection, this moment still seems to catch them off guard. Like, way off guard. When these faithful women came to the tomb to mourn and grieve together, they were not expecting this at all–this is a surprise that immediately takes them out of their usual routine. Instead of preparing a body for burial, they are confronted by this brilliant light and life changing truth: Jesus is no longer dead, but alive.

I know that for many or even most of us, this seems impossible. And normally, it is. On any other day, in any other place, with any other body, it would have been utterly impossible–but the impossible is no match for Jesus. I know it might seem silly to believe in a crucified but resurrected Messiah, especially when our world tells us that faith in anything that we can’t see or touch is absurd or foolish, but my friends, what’s really absurd and foolish is going through life without being open to things we don’t understand or aren’t expecting. What’s really absurd and foolish is going through the motions of our routines without any sort of awe or hope to inspire us. What’s really absurd and foolish is giving up on faith because it’s easier to be cynical or jaded.

So I’ll ask you this, as you reflect on our story for this morning: are you willing to let yourself be amazed today? Are you willing to stop, just for a few moments, so that you can be captivated by what is in front of you? Are you willing to suspend what you think you know for a truth that is so dazzling that it will change your life? Are you willing to marvel at this miracle of an empty tomb, even if it means taking a chance on seeing something that you’ve never seen before?

You might find that if you pause, and you open yourself up to the truth of this story, that your soul has been longing for this moment. You might find that your soul has needed this renewed sense of hope more than you ever dared speak aloud. You might find that your soul has needed a reason to keep going,

because your daily routine has gotten too hard to handle. You might find that your soul has been desperate for some good news, desperate to know that this life isn't all that there is, desperate to know that you are loved so much that not even death could keep you from Jesus, desperate to know that this powerful love has triumphed over every force that has tried to stop it.

If you believed in the truth of this story, setting aside any doubts and fear, you might find that resurrection is for you too. Resurrection that isn't just confined to Jesus, or a relic of two thousand years ago, but a living reality that you, yes you, can join—an opportunity to be renewed and restored right where you are. What is broken or hurting inside of you doesn't have to stay that way. What is dead or lifeless within you doesn't have to stay that way. What is hopeless and meaningless in your life doesn't have to stay that way. New life might look like a beautiful view that gives you the excitement to explore again, it might look like a friendship that fills your heart with joy, it might look like a prayer that tethers you to God and gives you courage to keep going.

True amazement can bring new life to our souls, and bring out of the depths of despair, disillusionment, or discouragement that threaten to keep us trapped and apathetic. True amazement has the power to rewrite our story, because Jesus shows us that not even death is the end for us.

So my friends, receive this good and awesome news: he is risen, he is risen indeed.

Amen.