

'Shock and Awe'

An Easter Sermon

(Mark 16:1-8)

“As they entered the tomb they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.”

Absolute Beginners has become a cult film of the 1980s. It starred David Bowie, and also featured Ray Davies (lead singer and song writer of The Kinks), who played a 'hen-pecked husband and father'. His theme song in the film is entitled 'Quiet Life', and it includes the lines:

“All I want is a quiet life
Anything for a quiet life
No ambition to rock the boat
When I can just stay afloat.”

If you were a disciple of Jesus as depicted in Mark's Gospel there was no prospect of a quiet life, because everything was immediate, urgent, and frenetic. Yes, according to the Gospel of Mark, following Jesus was fast and furious.

But surely that was behind them now? Because they had witnessed his arrest, trial, and death – now was the time to stop, grieve, and tend the body. And so, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome arrive quietly at the tomb early in the morning with their spices; but the calmness of the scene is about to be shattered – their 'boats' will be well and truly 'rocked'!

Before that occurred, they must have been relieved to see that the stone had been removed; but their relief soon turned to confusion, their confusion to fear. We now reach a key verse in this passage, verse 5, “As they entered the tomb they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.” English language Bibles translate that word 'alarmed', 'amazed', or 'astonished', and yet the Greek word means much more as it holds together contrasting feelings in tension: fear and wonder; dread and marvel; shock and awe.

These words 'shock and awe' have taken on new meaning in recent times. Since the continuous bombing of Baghdad which occurred in March 2003, the term has been associated with a military doctrine of absolute force, the use of overwhelming power to paralyze an enemy – this is death-determined conflict.

Today I wish to reclaim these words for Easter because they express the 'gut reaction' to Resurrection: shock at the unexpected; awe at the inexplicable. Yes, shock and awe as we are confronted, confused and confounded, not by the paralyzing force of death-determined conflict, but by the liberating power of death-defying compassion which reveals the very nature of God and how God works in the world.

The Gospel passage moves on, "Don't be alarmed," says the 'man in white' to the three women (which must have been reassuring to them, but then he continues with words that must have heightened the tension), "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." We are dealing with the actual, the tangible, the physical here – this is flesh and blood, so don't be afraid.

This is Jesus of Nazareth, a person of a certain time and place, who now reveals the truth of every time and place, the everlasting truth of God's death-defying compassion – that the God who shares our pain on the cross, also raises us to new life, even in the face of death, when our gut reaction is shock and awe at the power of God's love.

We live in a time and place which holds to a 'blind faith', and this unquestioned religion tells us that science, technology and global capitalism are the answer to our prayers, they are our salvation because they meet our every need – so, no need for mystery, wonder and the divine. Yet, we hear the 'man in white' saying to the three women, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him . . ." Galilee was their time and place, their here and now, their home, where Resurrection would be known to them. And so it is with us, not Galilee, but our daily lives, those times and places we inhabit, where love finds us and raises us, and shows us what is everlasting.

Today we reclaim 'shock and awe' from death-determined conflict and claim it for Easter, because 'Shock and Awe' is a fitting title for the story of Resurrection in Mark's Gospel, the Gospel which tells us that following Jesus is immediate, urgent, frenetic, with no prospect of a quiet life. Even when they

thought that it was all over, that all was lost to them, 'shock and awe' was the flavour of the day: "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."

In our time and place which holds to a faith that diminishes the unexpected, dismisses the inexplicable and uses feelings of wonder to speak of war, let us speak of our gut reaction to Resurrection: shock and awe that mystery, wonder and the divine are part of our daily lives; shock and awe at the death-defying compassion of God; shock and awe that with Jesus, the Risen One, everlasting love has found us and sets us free.

"He is going ahead of you back home, there you will see him."

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