



Sermon delivered by
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
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"The *Not So Amazed*"
(Mark 1: 21-28)

There are people who are just too smart for the rest of us. There are people who know most of what we know, but they know even more than you and I could ever claim to know. 49 years ago this coming July, Apollo 11 landed on the moon's surface. A few days later, the families in our neighborhood held a celebratory picnic. It was a grand time, and it included shooting off contraband fireworks. There was one family who lived on our street and who attended the celebration, the father of which was a well-known "know-it-all." Not much impressed that man. I forget what he did for a living, but I do recall he worked in some capacity at the University of Pittsburgh. At one point during the picnic, my mother heard him say that landing on the moon and walking on the moon wasn't all that impressive. According to that man, getting to the moon and walking on the moon was going to happen sooner or later, and there you have it. I recall my mother saying afterwards that she was almost tempted to pour her cup of punch over his head, which for my mother would have been a sight to behold.

When I was in college and after sitting some exam that I found to be difficult and which had challenged my learning curve, the last thing I wanted to hear from another classmate was how easy the exam was. Such people are not in touch with reality, at least not my reality. Like that father who lived on our street, such people should be seen and not heard. They are the people who breeze through life unhindered, unimpressed by the things that trip up mortals like you and me, and, of course, I speak mostly for myself.

Even today, I still encounter people who profess to know it all, present company excluded. For me, there is nothing more unpleasant than to be at some event, especially a wedding reception, and to be encountered by someone who wants to debate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By now, I can recognize those people when they head my way, and I avoid them. Let me remind you that we Christians admittedly, *admittedly* confess that faith is not a function of logic. You cannot figure out or explain or account for the resurrection of the

incarnation or even the forgiveness of sin except by faith. Jesus did not leave behind some spread-sheet explaining how the resurrection happened to Him or how it will happen to us. All we need to know is that it happened to Jesus Christ, and for those who believe, it shall also happen to them, and for the fulfillment of that promise I am willing to be amazed and astonished, and to live each day of my life in awe. Simply on the basis of faith, and faith alone, you and I shall one day be in Paradise, like that thief on the cross next to the Lord. Talk about being amazed. That thief knew all about being amazed!

St. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the gospels, and thus there is not a wasted word in any of those 16 chapters. Every word has been chosen carefully, faithfully, intentionally, because the goal of Mark's gospel is to inform us of what once happened in a corner of the world known as the Holy Land (and did I tell you I just returned from there!?). In the morning lesson, Mark picks up the gospel in a town, really a village called Capernaum, and we were there a mere 10 days ago. After Jesus gets tossed out of Nazareth, He moves to Capernaum, and He lives with Simon Peter, and there Jesus unfolds the majority of His teachings and His healings and His miracles and where He forms relationships with people many thought were inappropriate. In Capernaum, Jesus came to be known as a rabbi but more importantly as a human being, as a member of the larger community, and to some within that larger community what Jesus said and did proved to be *amazing*. Mark tells us that the people of the synagogue were astounded by what Jesus taught, and to them it was clear that Jesus did not teach like the Scribes. In other words, Jesus was found to be guilty of coloring "outside of the lines," if you know what I mean.

Years ago, I was invited one rainy afternoon to color with someone in a newly purchased coloring book. I was offered an array of crayons of many colors, and the agreed upon plan was that I would use one color while my friend used another color, and we would color pages of different animals, dogs, cats, cows, horses, rabbits. You get the picture. But, soon, I was called on the carpet for not coloring within the lines. The person in charge made it clear to me that all the colors needed to stay within the lines of the animal figures, and if I continued to go beyond the lines then I needed to find something else better to do with my rainy day. I assure you, I repented of my ways, and I stayed within the lines.

St. Mark points out that Jesus did not teach like the Scribes, and I am not surprised. Those Scribes, if you will, always colored within the lines. It was their duty, their responsibility as Scribes to keep firmly and faithfully to the letter of the Jewish law. According to the Scribes, one did not make it up as you went along nor did you fudge "here"

or “there.” What the law said, went, and if you fell outside of the law, God help you. Jesus astonished and astounded the people because Jesus interpreted the law through the lens of grace and mercy, and according to some grace and mercy will take you outside the lines every time. There is an echo here of what St. John would go on to write: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth,* and of course, mercy.

I have always been fascinated that the illustration Mark gives for Christ’s mercy includes an unclean spirit. Right there in the synagogue, a holy and sacred space, Jesus encounters a man possessed by an unclean spirit. Mark makes sure we know this much: that unclean spirit knew Whom Jesus is. *I know Who you are,* so said the unclean spirit. And the next thing we know, Jesus commands that unclean spirit to come out of that man’s life, and guess what? The unclean spirit obeys, Jesus. Here’s the point: Jesus had mercy upon that unclean spirit. Jesus could have destroyed that spirit, but, instead, sends that spirit packing. And the people marveled at what they witnessed. Mark tells us they were amazed, and as you and I would have been amazed, no less! Well, maybe most of us would have been amazed, but maybe not the father who once lived on my old neighbor street and maybe not those who come at faith through the lens of logic.

Let me say this because I do not want to be misunderstood. It is okay, it is acceptable, it is permissible, it is even responsible to be amazed and astonished and astounded by being a person of faith. 2 plus 2 equaling 4 again and again is pretty amazing, but what is even more amazing is God’s forgiving love spent on us when we are 15 years old and again at 16 and at 20 and at 40 and until the day you leave this life. Living one’s life with a sense of awe will not shorten your life by one minute. If anything, it may brighten your life, it may even enlarge your life. Mark tells us that the people were amazed by Jesus because He taught them in a brand new way. No longer was life to be lived or understood in terms black and white. Life, according to Jesus, is to be lived beyond black and white. That’s the whole meaning of the third candle in the Advent Wreath. The rose or the pink candle reminds us of how amazing life has been created to be for us. There are many in this room who remember the days of black and white television, and there are many who still recall the moment when we gazed into the screen of a color television set. People and shapes and backgrounds took on a whole new dimension. People began to appear almost 3-dimensional. I recall our first color television set, and I remember the moment I realized that Lucille Ball’s hair was orange, at least on our set it was orange.

Jesus made the law come to life for the people of His day. No longer did they fear the law. They came to understand the law as God's way of drawing them closer to the divine heart, very close, and in time Mark connects the dots for us. Jesus **is** the law, not an all-or-nothing law, but a law of grace and truth and mercy, a law of forgiveness and peace and hope and love and joy. That kind of law you can't keep within the lines. That kind of law that spills out all over the place, like the flow of blood when a wound has been inflicted. And you know where the Spirit is taking us, don't you?

Jesus astounded and astonished people because of His willingness to die for us. The new teaching is that Jesus finds us worth dying for, worth going out beyond the lines, worth dying *our* death so you and I may live a full and abundant and forgiven and joy-filled life. What *is* astounding, what *is* amazing is that the mercy Jesus holds for us is meant for life, not death, not punishment, but life. I have imagined more than once as to what happened to that unclean spirit, and I have imagined that that unclean spirit went back to other unclean spirits and told them what happened. Jesus did not destroy. Jesus had mercy, and I picture that unclean spirit crossing over from the dark side to be with Jesus. I picture that unclean spirit no longer being unclean, but being welcomed into the arms of the Saviour.

And what is truly amazing is that if that is how our Lord treats the unclean spirit, then how might we expect Him to treat us, those of us of His own family, those who have been baptized in His precious and life-redeeming not just Name but blood? Well, I think we know. He treats us in ways that amaze and astonish, and we should well be amazed and astonished, unless of course, we know more than He does.

Let us pray: Holy God, inspire us by Holy Spirit to make known *our* amazement of Your dear Son, Jesus. Because of His teachings, miracles and merciful love, inspire us to allow our astonishment to overflow, and all with the hope that they, too, may come to know Christ as we know Him through the gift of faith. Amen.

