

## The Terror of Easter

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown  
Washington, D.C.

April 3, 2021 / Great Vigil of Easter

by Andrew A. Kryzak

*Romans 6:3-11*

*Mark 16:1-8*

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever had a religious experience? What was that like, I wonder?

In his 1902 book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the psychologist and philosopher William James gives four criteria, which have come to define what we commonly think of as a religious experiences. According to James's formula, such an experience must be transient, or temporary; it must be ineffable (or difficult to put into words); noetic (which means that it has transmitted a valuable lesson); and finally it must be passive, something that happens to the individual without conscious control.<sup>1</sup>

These criteria are the basic components of what has become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century an intellectual commonplace. A "religious experience," is something that is essentially individual and private, existing in the world of the personal. It is a category of activity that is of great value to the individual or (at most) the small group; it's attractive for the pleasant sensations or realizations that it produces; but it is of limited utility for anyone else. James imagined religion as an entirely internal phenomenon, as something neither verifiable nor contestable, and indeed it has become nearly impossible to imagine *what else* religion might be about.<sup>2</sup> So much of the stock language of "spirituality," especially as something defined in opposition to "religion," derives from James's formulation.

Contrast all of this with the witness of the women at Jesus' tomb, which we have just heard in St Mark's gospel. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome arrive at the tomb, expecting to anoint the dead and disfigured body of Jesus, to give him some semblance of a proper burial. To their astonishment, they find that the stone had already been rolled back, and there is a man sitting there, his robe dazzling white, and the body of Jesus is nowhere to be seen. And what happens then? Do they have a "religious experience?"

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116.

Quite the opposite.

The women respond in the way that most characters in the Bible respond when they come face to face with the reality of the living God: they are dumbfounded, and they are terrified. In just four verses, tonight's passage deploys four different words indicating awe, trembling, and fear.<sup>3</sup> This is not a private and subjective moment of higher consciousness; this is an all-too-real encounter with the power, might, and majesty of God himself, made known through one of his messengers. Even if the messenger's initial greeting to the women, "Do not be alarmed," was successful in calming their nerves (which seems unlikely), his news to them riles them up all over again: "He has been raised; he is not here... he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

As one clerical observer puts the case, "For the women, the only thing more terrifying than a world with Jesus dead was one in which he was alive."<sup>4</sup> Easter is not a "religious experience." Easter is unsettling. Easter is terrifying.

Many faithful Christians tend to move rather quickly to forget the stark solemnity of Good Friday and embrace the jubilee of the third day. There's a reason why attendance is usually sparse on Friday and packed on Sunday: Sunday's great! We decorate the church; we put on our Easter dresses and bow ties. After all of the blood, gore, and death, we're eager to go back to a posture of optimism, of hope. I can think back over the past few years to the deaths, the misfortunes, the irreconcilable differences which tend to crop up, either in the present or in the memory, around this time of year. On Good Friday, we lay all of that at the foot of the cross, and we proceed to Easter, oftentimes putting on a happy face to match our Easter best.

A good many churches even omit the confession of sin on Easter Day, as if they've had their fill of unpleasantness, as if hearing the common people, the ordinary bystanders shout "Crucify him," was enough for this year. No one likes to be reminded of God's calling out his people, which we hear on Good Friday: *O my people, what have I done unto thee? Or wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me. Because I brought thee forth from the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a cross for thy Saviour.*<sup>5</sup>

But Easter is not about forgetting. The women at the tomb could not forget. They did not arrive to find it was all a dream. But importantly, neither did they arrive to find what they expected: they did not find the cold, lonely body of their friend and Lord. They arrived to find that the impossible had happened, that the God who had once made Abraham the father of many

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<sup>3</sup> ἐξεθαμβήθησαν, τρόμος, ἔκστασις, ἐφοβοῦντο.

<sup>4</sup> Esau McCaulley, "The Unsettling Power of Easter," *New York Times*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/opinion/easter-celebration.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Improperia for Good Friday.

nations, the God who had once led their forebears out of Egypt, the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist had raised Jesus from the dead.<sup>6</sup> Jesus, who had hung on the cross, who had looked on the mess before him, on his own broken body, the jeering crowd, his scattered and weak disciples, who took on the whole power of sin and death and declared IT IS FINISHED... God had raised him from the dead. And in doing so, he had transcended the tragedies of human existence and inaugurated a new chapter in the history of salvation. The God whose power once terrified the women at the tomb is the same God whose power breaks the bonds of death and open to us the gates of life.

As St Paul writes, *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his... death no longer has dominion over him.*<sup>7</sup>

The world of “religious experience,” which William James describes, tends to lack a referent. Accord to his criteria, any sort of unexpected, temporary, internal experience with a perceived teachable moment counts as “religious.” But Easter is not a “religious experience.” Easter, and this service, and the whole life of the church and the lives of every Christian baptized with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit point to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the grave. It is an event so overwhelming as to make us tremble with awe, if we should stop to think about it.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

AMEN.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:17

<sup>7</sup> Romans 6:5, 9.