

“So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.” (Mark 16:8)

You know what that’s like, don’t you?

When my family and I were on safari in South Africa a few years ago, apprehension filled us and wonder transfixed us as we traversed through wild open fields in a doorless Land Cruiser. Lions rolled in the grass less than a foot away from us. Zebras galloped in perfect formation around us. And elephants drank water from the pools outside our lodge door in the afternoon. We weren’t sure whether to be in awe or if fear for our lives. I suspect you may have encountered similar awe and fear when your child was placed in your arms the first time or when you said “I do.” Although you had been waiting for those moments, perhaps there was still a part of you that wondered what in the world you had gotten yourself into. Or, maybe you knew the paradox of fear and mesmerization before a much-needed-but-still-unexpected surgery.

On March 6, 1987, terror and amazement became the language of more than 500 passengers aboard the British ferry *The Herald of Free-Enterprise*.¹ Less than two minutes after departing from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge, it began to sink. The boatswain, the person responsible for latching the door to the car deck, had gone to sleep before the ferry’s departure. The officer who was responsible for checking that the boatswain had locked the doors didn’t bother to walk the few feet required to do so. A 3rd ferry employee noticed the doors weren’t closed but shrugged off responsibility by telling himself that it was someone else’s job. Unsurprisingly, it did not take long for the port’s high seas to drench the once indomitable vessel and send hundreds of lives into a tailspin. It was terror writ large.

¹ Godfrey Holmes, “Zeebrugge ferry disaster, 30 years on: Deadly failings behind one of UK’s worst peacetime maritime tragedies,” *The Independent*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/zebrugge-ferry-disaster-ms-herald-of-free-enterprise-uk-30-years-on-maritime-tragedy-killed-a7583131.html>, accessed March 30, 2018.

It would not be the last word.

In the midst of the imploding darkness, 33 year-old Andrew Parker, traveling with his wife and daughter, saw a chance to alter destiny.

Getting down on his hands and knees, he wrapped his ankles around the edge of a metal barrier on one side of the ferry and extended his 6-foot, 3-inch frame to a gate on the other side—the side leaning away from the water. Wrapping his wrists around the gate, Andrew Parker became a human bridge. While some folks wondered how in the world he did what he did, others threw aside their befuddlement and fear and walked across Andrew's back to higher ground.²

What Andrew did defies words, but to those who did not risk the improbability of his body as a path to life, his feat was simply that—a feat. It would not change their lives. Only those who chose to cross could know the lasting power of his sacrifice—a sacrifice that could have been avoided in the first place had people been taken their vocation seriously. But they didn't, and Andrew stepped in. The Queen feted Mr. Parker with one of the Crown's highest honors. Make no mistake though, the point of the praise was never simply about what Andrew Parker did. The point was what Andrew Parker enabled other people to do—have a second chance at life.

On Friday—Good Friday as we've paradoxically come to call it—Jesus, like Andrew Parker, was stretched out—not between metal barriers but upon a tree.³ His stretching out bridged the gap between the arrogance, complacency, selfishness, and dog-eat-dog way of life on which we've built society and God's matchless love and unrelenting desire to be with us. Make no mistake, it wasn't easy. It cost him a descent into hell, a descent that could not be avoided or extricated from.

It was the last word.

Or so everyone thought.

While death may have had the last word, God's love had the last laugh. The empty tomb was and is God's once and final YES to death's unrelenting NO, and it became our bridge to life. To all the deaths we face each day, to all the stories that say your age, your doubt,

² Samuel Wells, *Hanging by a Thread: The Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 28-9.

³ Ibid.

your past, your failure, your grief, your messy family history, your wearied soul laden with the world's definition and expectation of who you can and can't be at 11 or 51 or 91, Jesus' resurrection from the dead says, "it's not over."

Don't be fooled though. Just as the heroics of Andrew Parker were not the point, neither is the empty tomb. The point is what you will do now that death and its forces are no longer the final word in your life, my life, and all within the reach of God's love. Yes, "death [and failure and suffering are a part of] reality, just not the ultimate one. Easter is the proclamation that even death must bow to [God's] possibility."⁴

Like the scared and frightened passengers that March evening, you have a choice: you can look back at what you have done, where you've been, who screwed you over, and on and on. You can spend hours pondering the probability of the resurrection. Or, you can walk straight ahead into the infinite chances and freedom God's power has afforded you to live and love and share boldly.

Will today be simply a memory, a festive occasion to dress up and gather with friends and family? Or, will it be the very pathway to the rest of your life's story? Will it change how you live and work and love so that you are not so doggone afraid and jealous that the person next to you is a threat or competition and not your brother and sister in Christ? Will you not be so quick to write yourself or others off knowing that God has not and will not write you off? Will you live expectantly and more freely?

My friends, the angel's charge to Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome this morning is the same charge to you: "Go ahead and tell the others!" Live a life that tells the goodness of God. If the women wanted to see Jesus this morning they needed to move past the empty tomb to Galilee where Jesus was.⁵ If you want to encounter Jesus don't just be content to celebrate today and then carry on tomorrow as if nothing has changed. You would not be here if this was just another day. Don't settle for living that way. **You** are the rest of the Gospel. Live this story with all that you are, and the world will stand in awe; death and darkness will cover in terror.

⁴ Jonathan Martin, "Things Aren't Going to End Well," Email distribution, March 30, 2018, *Son of a Preacher Man*, accessed March 30, 2018.

⁵ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 284.

Friends, we don't shout "Alleluia!" because the resurrection is how Jesus' life ended. We rejoice because the resurrection is the beginning of what will happen to you.⁶

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⁶ Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).