

“Flabbergasted”

Reading: Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-11

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

It was the summer of 2010, and Pastor Carey and I were in Annapolis, Maryland to pick up Carey’s sister, who had been working there that summer. We took a couple of days for some sightseeing in the area, and one of the places we went was the United States Naval Academy. We went to the visitor’s center and started looking around, and before long we came around a wall and I found myself face to face with Freedom 7. Freedom 7, if you’ve forgotten your history, was the spacecraft that carried Alan Shepard into space in 1961 in the first human spaceflight by Americans. You know me: as a sci-fi fan, anything to do with space is bound to get me excited, but Freedom 7 is one of the most important spacecraft in the history of space exploration, and here I was, suddenly and unexpectedly standing mere inches from it.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had one of those moments, when you can almost feel the fuse popping in your head. I had no idea Freedom 7 was there; I always assumed it would be at NASA or the Smithsonian. I didn’t even have a camera with me. Imagine if you walked into your living room one morning and found one of your greatest heroes sitting on your sofa reading the newspaper. You simply can’t prepare yourself for something like that; there are those moments in life when you literally don’t know how to react. Your brain gets overloaded trying to compute the data it’s receiving. Here was Freedom 7, a real, live spaceship, one of the most important spaceships ever...who put *that* here?

I was flabbergasted. It’s a great word, flabbergasted: just saying it gives you a sense of what it means. I was flabbergasted, agog, aghast, unsure how to respond because I was so overwhelmed by unexpected excitement. I wasn’t so flabbergasted that I was falling apart, but there are times when people are confronted by such overwhelming situations that they are physiologically incapable of making wise choices; they literally don’t know what to do. Sometimes in traumatic situations people are so shocked that they do crazy things. For example, sometimes when people are freezing to death, they’ll start taking off their clothes because they think they’re overheating. It’s completely nonsensical, but their brains are literally shutting down.

Flabbergasted. Unsure what to do next, or even what we ought to feel. Not even sure how to put the experience into words. Some of those experiences are more extreme than others — suddenly seeing Freedom 7 is nowhere near as extreme as freezing to death — but there are those moments when we’re not even sure how we’re supposed to feel, whether from the flood of emotion or the lack.

There is a very real, very natural confusion surrounding the Easter event. We’re supposed to feel one thing, joy, but maybe we don’t always feel it as powerfully as we think we’re supposed to. Maybe we get flabbergasted by life and its capricious events. Maybe we’re just tired, or maybe we’re apathetic, or maybe we just don’t know how to comprehend something that we’re told is so enormous. Maybe we’re ambivalent, feeling multiple things at once, because life is complex and we’re complex and we can rarely sort things out neatly. As a pastor I always feel the pressure for our Easter celebration to live up to the magnificence of the Easter story. I feel like we should have trumpets fanfaring and choirs singing like angels; we should be dancing out of unrestrainable joy.

And, of course, I should have the best sermon to preach out of the entire year. It's Easter! Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! And while we could spend weeks delving deep into the event of Easter and all it means, and we could intellectually comprehend the implications of the event, that still doesn't necessarily mean that we always know what to feel or what to do. It's easy to get flabbergasted.

The good news is that it's okay to be flabbergasted. Lots of people were flabbergasted by Easter. In fact, a sense of confusion is pervasive in the accounts of the resurrection of Christ. No one knew how to respond or how to act or even what to feel at first. The gospel of Mark, for example, probably originally ended with these words: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Mark's story of Jesus originally ended with trembling, bewilderment, and fear. Hardly the triumphant, joyous refrain of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." Or in Matthew's account, the story of the resurrection begins with a violent earthquake. The guards at the tomb are so afraid that they faint. The angel tells the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid," but even so, Matthew reports that they hurried away, "afraid yet filled with joy." At the end, when Jesus is giving them the marching orders of the church, even then, we're told that they worshiped Him, "but some doubted."

In Luke's gospel, we hear about a couple of Jesus' disciples who hear the news about the resurrection but head out of town, confused and downcast. When Jesus appears to the disciples later, they are "startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost." There's also Thomas's story in the gospel of John, who hears the news but refuses to believe unless he touches the risen Christ. And this is leaving out the responses of most other people around: the city officials, who conspired to spread the news that Jesus' body was stolen, or everyone else in the world, who simply had no idea what had happened.

These are people who simply were not prepared to know how to respond when the news came that Jesus was alive. Jesus had tried to tell them that His mission would lead Him to the cross, and that He would be raised from the dead three days later, but can we really blame them for not quite grasping the full import of that? In the week before the resurrection, they had witnessed Jesus arriving in the capital city as a triumphant king, which led to all sorts of expectations for what He might do next. They'd heard Him teach and debate the religious leaders, they'd celebrated a very unusual Passover meal with Him, and then they'd seen one of their own betray Him, hand Him over to a conspiracy, and watched as everything they had worked for over the last three years, as well as their hopes for generations of their people, collapse when He died the shameful death of a criminal. They surely spent the intervening days in grief and fear, hiding and trying to come to grips with their dashed dreams.

And then the news broadsides them: Jesus is alive. What does that even mean? What can that possibly imply? What comes next? Fear, trembling, joy, bewilderment, worship, doubt. Flabbergasted. They're just trying to understand; their nerves are already frayed, and now this. How to do justice to the event when we're struggling to understand what it means, and when we're struggling through the circumstances of our lives to understand how this resurrection impacts us? It was a struggle for them, and it's a struggle for us today.

The Apostle Paul engaged this struggle in his letter to the Colossians. The impact of Easter is that you and I are given the opportunity to be in Christ. It's not just that we can follow Jesus or listen

to His teachings or even live as He lived, it's that Christ can identify us and fill us and transform us. In Colossians 2, Paul says, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Those are some of the verses we referred to over the last few weeks, as we explored how it is that the crucifixion of Christ changes us today. But along with that forgiveness of sins offered to us on the cross comes the identification with Christ: God makes us alive in Christ.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above," Paul says in the next chapter. Jesus walking out of that tomb that Sunday morning so long ago was not only good news for Him. It wasn't just a second chance for Him, it was the beginning of the resurrection of all who are in Christ. We sense Paul beginning to grasp at words: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." The full meaning of this resurrection is hard to grasp, it's somewhat hidden, flabbergasting, but Paul points us to the reality that Christ will return and everything will then be complete.

But the question for us today on this Easter Sunday is what we do now. What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us today, on this day after Jesus' resurrection but before His return? To those flabbergasted disciples, Jesus gave a mission: go and make disciples of all nations. To the Colossian Christians, Paul says to set your mind on things above, not earthly things. Set your mind where your life truly is, with Christ, seated in heaven at the right hand of His Father. We may struggle with the full meaning of Easter, and we may not always feel the joy or excitement that is appropriate for the good news, but we have a mission.

It might seem, at first glance, that Paul is telling us something that is merely comforting. "Set your mind on things above" could mean nothing more challenging than "think happy thoughts." Maybe he's saying that earthly things don't matter, so we should just ignore them. But no, that's not at all what he means. Our lives may be hidden in Christ, and we may at times be flabbergasted, but that does not mean that what we do in response to Christ does not matter. Being raised with Christ means that we are raised to a new kind of life, a life that takes on an eternal quality to it because it matters for eternity, and eternity includes the here and now. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature," he says. There is a mission in that empty tomb of Jesus, a call to a new kind of life with new marching orders. Put to death whatever is contrary to it.

He gives us some examples: put to death things like "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry...anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language." What we do with our bodies and our thoughts and our words and our resources matters to God, because what we do reflects who we are, and we are called to live in Christ. We take off our old selves and put on Christ. "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all," he says. The meaning is that not only does the kingdom of Christ break down barriers and make brothers and sisters out of those who would normally be enemies, we are called to set aside those labels that the world uses to identify and categorize us, and instead find our identities in Christ. More than just a statement of the reality that the invitation to the kingdom is

open to all through the work of Christ, this is a statement of our rejection of those old worldly identities as well, as Christ works in us.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead; He has defeated death on its own terms and has offered His victory to all of us as well. We struggle to do justice to the overwhelming enormity of that message in our celebrations and in our lives, but while we are struggling to understand, Christ gives us direction. He tells His followers to go to Galilee to receive the mission He has for them. He gives them marching orders to proclaim the good news that death has been defeated, and that God is crafting a new family for Himself, and everyone who will come is invited.

And life in this kingdom looks like this, if we continue reading in Colossians 3: “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” This is the hope of Easter, of life in Christ who has defeated death.



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