

## **“When You’re Conquered”**

*Reading: Mark 16:1-8; Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43*

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Imagine what might happen one day if our skies were suddenly filled with flying saucers from outer space. Something just like in the movies: a full scale invasion by space aliens, complete with spinning UFOs, death rays, bug-eyed tentacle monsters, the works. It’s a scene straight from H.G. Wells or any number of stories or movies influenced by him. The militaries of the world are, for once, united against a common, unstoppable foe, but to no avail. Our best tactics and brightest generals are completely ineffective, and even when we arrive at the last resort of nuclear attack, the aliens laugh at even our most powerful nuclear weapons. And in this case, unlike the H.G. Wells story or so many of our movies, we are not saved at the last minute by some unforeseen weakness in the aliens’ plan. They are not susceptible to terrestrial germs. There is no plucky human hero who can hack into their computers and save the day. They don’t have just one machine controlling the entire invasion that, when it’s knocked out, miraculously shuts down all the alien war machines. No, in this case, they win, completely, utterly, with no hope of defeat. We are conquered.

Personally, I think that the search for extra-terrestrial life is a worthwhile one, because it has the potential to answer some of our fundamental questions about the meaning of life and the foundations of reality, not to mention our theology. If we do find life on other planets, that has huge implications for our understanding of the universe. And likewise, if we expect to find life on other planets but don’t, that also has huge implications for us. It’s not just the domain of science fiction; some of the most brilliant scientists alive have weighed in on the question of whether it’s wise for us to actively seek out alien life. Because if we find it and it decides to kill us, that’s a terrifying prospect. Aside from questions of survival, it would force us to question our place in the universe and the meaning of life. It would be a reality-changing event for us.

I sometimes think we ought to talk about God more by using the analogy of space aliens, because we are indeed talking about a supremely powerful intelligence from beyond this world. When we imagine space aliens we often imagine extremely weird kinds of creatures; they push our creativity because if there is alien life, it would really be truly alien, truly and probably quite fundamentally different than us. It’s hard to even imagine how we might begin to understand what such life might be like. And when we talk about God, we need to remember how different than us He is. He is not some white-bearded, white-robed old man sitting on a cloud in the sky; He is vastly different than we are. Please understand that I am not suggesting in any way that God is actually a space alien, but sometimes we need to find ways of sneaking around the comfortable presuppositions and images that we’ve absorbed about God. One of the dangers of religion is that it runs the risk of making our views of God rather familiar and tame.

But today on Easter, and especially as we read Mark’s account of Easter, the God we see revealed is anything but tame. Today on Easter, we are conquered by an unstoppable power. Today on Easter we come face to face with a wholly other reality. What we think we know about how the universe works is called into question. We are stripped of our ability to rely on our senses and our skills and our strength. Today we are conquered by God.

This year we're reading the resurrection story from Mark's gospel, which has some unique elements to it. Mark's gospel has a confusing ending to it, both from a story standpoint as well as a textual standpoint. Our reading ends with verse 8, and many of your Bibles may have a note of some sort at verse 9 that many of the earliest examples we have to this text end at verse 8. For that and various other reasons, most scholars think it's likely that verses 9 and following weren't there originally. But that leaves us with a confusing end to the story, because this gospel message of good news and God's faithfulness and salvation and power ends with these women hurrying away from the empty tomb in fear and confusion, saying nothing to anyone else. There's no actual post-resurrection appearance of Jesus mentioned. It's an ambiguous ending; we get the good news from the angel, but we don't really see any proof of it or fruit from it. It's completely understandable that someone would think that we need a little more information added to the end, which is probably what happened. The longer ending your Bible probably has in it isn't wrong, and it pretty much summarizes what we see in the other gospel accounts. But it's probably not how the story originally ended.

And so, at least according to one version of the story, the gospel ends in fear and confusion. The angel tries to reassure the women, giving them the classic angelic message of "Don't be alarmed," and the angel gives them the good news of the resurrection and gives them a mission to go tell the apostles, but they're still afraid. The resurrection is a cause of bewilderment, not joy. They came in fear because of the terrible events surrounding the cross, but they leave in fear because of the terrible implications of the resurrection.

And that is not an inappropriate response. We get too comfortable with our God, and we forget the powerful implications of what God is doing. A man who has just been definitively defeated, who was arrested without putting up a fight, tried for treason without making a defense, beaten and shamed without resistance, mocked without any response, crucified without a struggle, and laid dead and cold in a tomb for days without stirring, has now just gotten up and walked out as a sign of God's approval on Him. The unstoppable power of the Roman Empire has just been undone, and the inescapable prison of death has just been cracked open.

God has just invaded our world in the God-Man Jesus, and He has laid claim to our world through the proclamation of His kingdom through Jesus' teaching and healings. When that claim was contested by the world's powers in the religious authorities and Roman government, and when those worldly powers resisted God's invasion by striking out at Jesus and humiliating Him and crucifying Him for all to see, God took their best shot and shook it off. Shame and death are the strongest weapons our world has to wield, and Jesus took them without resistance and walked out of the tomb to be glorified by His Father. On Easter, we are invaded, and we are conquered by God.

Being conquered is kind of a foreign concept for most of us in the United States. We haven't had a serious threat of being conquered by a foreign power in a couple of hundred years. Even in the Civil War, when both sides invaded one another at various points, at worst you would be conquered by your countrymen. The Nazis and the Imperial Japanese both made attempts at attacking the mainland United States during World War II, but we've got some pretty big oceans on either side of us, making actual invasion pretty unlikely, to say nothing of being truly conquered. It's just not something we really have much of a concept of in the United States. We're secure in our strength and we're proud of our military and our culture.

And yet we live in very fearful times. Being attacked is a very real possibility, as 9/11 showed us. We hear almost weekly of yet another shooting somewhere in our country, as well as some massacre elsewhere in the world. We live in fear of disease, we live in fear of chemicals, we live in fear of strangers, we live in fear of what the other political party might do if we let them have too much power, we live in fear of losing our jobs. We hear tragic stories from around the world of terrible evils, of beheadings and genocide and nations falling into chaos. And if it happens to be a slow news day, I can guarantee that they'll come up with something new for you to be afraid of. Some of those fears are not unreasonable, but let's be honest, with most of them either the odds of them happening are extremely low or there's nothing you can really do about it anyway.

But Easter presents us with a different and much larger reality. Our earth-bound eyes read the story of Christ's resurrection and we fail to see the reason for fear and trembling. We might think that this is just a story about Jesus going to heaven as a spirit or something, but that's not what the story says. His formerly dead and battered body was made new, resurrected, glorified, and He walked out of there on His own two very real feet as a living person, and He's alive right now. Or we think that this is a sign that He didn't really die; He just had a lucky escape. But no, death had Him in its grip, and He broke that grip. Or we think that His death and resurrection is a nice way for me to get saved, and we don't see that it's also heaven's invasion of our reality. Or we think that this is just a way for the story about this nice man Jesus to have a nice, happy ending, and we don't see that His resurrection is the beginning of *my* resurrection and *your* resurrection, for all who claim Him.

The women who came to the tomb left in fear and trembling because they were not and could not be prepared for the new reality they were faced with when they got there. The resurrection of Christ presents us with a new age in which God has arrived, He has walked among us, He has accepted upon Himself the greatest weapons of our world, and He has defeated them and disarmed them. Once God has broken the grip of death by being faithful unto death, death will never be the threat it once was. Once God has shamed shame by revealing it for what it is through His faithfulness, shame will never be the threat it once was. We have been invaded, we have been unexpectedly conquered, our eyes have been opened to a new reality, and fear and trembling are a natural response when your world is transformed.

And the question we must ask is this: are we submitting to being conquered by God, or are we still fighting against Him? Because let's face it, when you're beaten, you can either continue to fight against your conqueror, or you can give up. When you are confronted with a new reality that turns your old reality on its head, you can accept the new reality or you can fight like crazy to hold on to the old one.

But here's the *real* question that we have to face: why would you want to resist being conquered by God? We're not being faced with subjugation beneath an alien oppressor, or living under the heel of a foreign power. No, we're being faced with a choice between the old world that is ruled by death and hell and fear, or the new world that is ruled by God and is characterized by redemption and faithfulness and holiness. Why on earth would we cling to the old reality? Why on earth would we choose death over life? The world apart from God exercises control through instruments of humiliation and torture and death like the cross; Jesus Christ takes that cross and uses it as His supreme method of faithfulness and grace. The old world of death is dying. Why would we

cling to it when a new world of life is breaking in and inviting us to participate in its work of redemption?

Submitting to Christ means being free from the sting of death. Claiming the cross as our redemption rather than using the cross as a way to control others means that we set aside the false power of violence and claim the power of God's love. Reorienting our view of the world and founding it upon God rather than ourselves means that we are truly free to love, rather than compete and hate and mistrust. Bowing before Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and rejecting all of the false lords presented to us by the world gives us a hope that lasts beyond death and a holiness that cleanses us from hell. Today as we celebrate God's great invasion of our world in which He broke the back of death and offered us an eternal hope, where is your allegiance?



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