



# From Wonder to Awe

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott  
Luke 24:1-12

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Easter is a time of wonder for us all. One Saturday night before Easter, when our kids were very young, I told them the story of the resurrection from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John. How Peter and John were at home when Mary Magdalene came to them and said, “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb and I do not know where they have laid him.” So I told our kids how Peter and John had set off running to the tomb and were amazed to see Jesus wasn’t there and how excited they were. Later that evening, Ann Marie was singing a song very softly as she walked up to three-year old Lindsay’s room to kiss her good night. “Mommy what are you singing?” Ann Marie said, “I am singing about Jesus.” Lindsay said, “Oh yeah! Mom! Mom! Peter and John were running and running and they came to this place and they were so excited! Mom?” “Yes Lindsay?” “What were they excited about?”

Now that’s a great question! The answer to that question has changed the face of history and blessed the personal lives of countless people. And we know the answer. They were excited that Jesus Christ is quite literally alive—alive in body, soul and spirit. He is raised from the dead. Jesus Christ is standing right here with us in his risen power and he is present to you personally right here, right now. In fact, as the Bible teaches, “*that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9).



When John ran to the tomb and saw the grave clothes that had been wound around Jesus lying there, but no Jesus, he believed. We realize his first response was wonder and his second response was awe. Wonder and awe are a bit different from each other. Wonder is when you encounter something really rare or very unexpected. I once looked out the window and was stunned to see a magnificent double rainbow. Wonder! There is a bit of surprise in wonder. Awe, on the other hand, is a little bit different than wonder. Awe includes the wow of wonder but with awe we move from wonder to respect, from being bowled over to bowing down. Awe is about reverence. It is the bowed head that confesses and respects the One who created the wonder.

When I was in college, my buddies learned that there was to be a total eclipse of the sun. That's where the moon gets between us and the sun and blocks out all of the sunlight so that it becomes like midnight in the middle of the day. We had a two-hour drive to get to the place where the eclipse would be total, so four of us jumped into my car early one morning and we drove north on I-85 from Atlanta until the scheduled time for the eclipse began to draw near. We pulled off the highway, found a side road and parked in a gravel parking lot next to the busy interstate highway.

We watched as the moon began to draw between us and the sun. We didn't notice much change in the daylight until the sun was almost completely covered and then we saw what is called the diamond ring effect, where the moon has covered all but a tiny portion of the sun's light so you see a ring of light around the moon and one spot of brightness that looks just like a giant diamond, so it's a diamond ring in the sky. Suddenly, we saw darkness rush from one horizon to the other and in seconds the earth was plunged into darkness, but not a total darkness. There was a pulsating, ethereal halo around the moon, the corona, and the sky took on a marvelous violet-purplish tint and everything felt suddenly magical and marvelous. The horizons were an eerie yellow and orange-ish color. I remember our reaction, unplanned for, unanticipated. Wonder! Our mouths fell open with oo's and ah's. Overpowering wonder.<sup>1</sup> And then our wonder moved to awe, in respect and reverence for the God of such overwhelming beauty.



A total eclipse of the sun is very brief and never lasts more than seven-and-a-half quick minutes, but you want it to go on forever. I don't remember how long ours lasted but suddenly the opposite diamond ring appeared as the moon began to move off the face of the sun and daylight rushed from the opposite horizon, and it was daylight again. And, then, I became aware of another phenomenon. We had just witnessed one of the rarest, most awe-some, awe-inspiring spectacles in the natural world, and the noise and busyness of the traffic on the Interstate never stopped. No one else pulled over. People just kept on driving, kept on rushing to whatever they thought was so important, kept on moving ignoring

or paying scant attention to a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many, if not most of them.

This morning, we think about the wonder of the resurrection of Jesus and the respect-inducing, faith-producing awe flows from wonder. However, some of us may just be racing along the highway of life totally unaware of the Lord who loves you more than you love your own next breath. One of the reasons I love Easter Sunday is that it is a day to just plain stop and to become aware again of the majesty of the Lord who stands right in front of you and me in his risen power. I invite you to make the mental shift and move your mind to an awareness of the wonder of Jesus, who says to you, “Come to me all and I will give you rest.”

Movement from wonder to awe doesn’t just happen when watching the amazing things of our world. It’s also very personal. I once visited the hospital to see Don Bain, a young man in his twenties. Julie Johnson was with me. She was an intern working on the staff of our church. We walked into Don’s hospital room and I said, “Hi Don, how are you today?” He replied, “I am in excruciating pain, my health is not good and yet this is the happiest day of my life.” I glanced sideways at Julie to see her eyes bugging out a bit—mine were, too. “What do you mean?” I asked Don. He said, “Yesterday, Sandy Peterson came to visit me.” Now Sandy was a member of our church who worked as a part-time clerk in a bookstore. Don said, “Sandy told me about the encouragement she has found in Jesus Christ. She invited me to ask Jesus into my own life, and I did so. Now I know the Lord is with me.” Sandy had experienced the movement from wonder and awe about Jesus in her own life and her story led Don to experience his own movement from wonder to awe. In that room I, too, sensed awe for Jesus.

We see the shift from wonder—simple amazement—to awe—real respect and faith—many times in the Bible, but nowhere is it more evident than in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, the report of the life of Jesus. There we discover the report of four appearances of the risen Jesus, and reading them there is this “bam-bam-bam-bam” sense of people moving from wonder to awe.

In Luke's first report, it's Easter Sunday. Several women, such as Mary Magdalene, brought spices to the tomb only to discover that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance of Jesus' tomb, and when they went in, there was no body. Their reaction was puzzlement. Where is Jesus? Suddenly, two men, in dazzling clothes, stood beside them. Their first reaction was stronger than wonder, they were terrified and, then, in pure awe, they bowed to the ground. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

In Luke's second report, the women go to tell the other followers of Jesus what had happened and, as we've already heard, Peter and John raced to the tomb. Luke reports that Peter stooped to look in the tomb, saw the linen clothes but no body and he went home believing. He moved from the wonder to the awe that Jesus is alive.

In his third report, Luke tells us that on that same day, two followers of Jesus were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles away. Jesus joined walking with them but they didn't recognize him. When they reached their home, they invited Jesus to have supper with them and when he blessed and broke the bread they recognized him, and he vanished. Talk about moving from wonder to awe. They rushed back to Jerusalem only to hear the other disciples of Jesus saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Wonder builds upon wonder. Awe upon awe.

Finally, in his fourth report, Luke described that all of these people were gathered in one room, the two from Emmaus, the eleven disciples of Jesus and others all crowded together and jabbering among themselves when Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, (with wonder and fear), and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:36-39). Their wonder moved from simple amazement to deepest awe and their decision to trust Jesus and to follow Jesus wherever he might lead.

They knew Jesus had said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Trust God and trust also in me." He invites you to trust him, too.

Some time ago, a couple by the name of Tom and Janet Meade moved into West Lafayette, Indiana, where I was living at the time. They began to worship with us each Sunday. Janet had a deep sense of what it meant to have awe for Jesus but Tom had very little understanding of who Jesus is. He came to church to support Janet. They joined a small Bible study, led by Bob and Mary LaTurner, that met every Wednesday evening.

Bob and Mary quickly sensed the depth of Janet's faith in Christ and that Tom was unfamiliar with spiritual things. They began to build a close friendship with the Meades, and other members of the small group began to invite the Meades over socially. In the warmth of the group, Tom began to feel the freedom to ask personal and spiritual questions, such as, "Who is Jesus Christ?" and "What does it mean to receive Him?" Toward the end of the group's meeting one evening, Tom said, "I have decided to receive Jesus into my life and I would like to do it with you." There in the living room of the LaTurner's home, he knelt with his group gathered around him asked Jesus Christ to come into his life.

I have never seen a person grow spiritually as rapidly as Tom did. We became friends as we jogged together each morning. Tom ran four miles and I ran two, so he would run his first two miles and drop by my house and we would go on his final two. But one day, Tom began experiencing great pain in his lower back. Yet, repeated tests in many hospitals could find no cause. One day, I received a call to go to the hospital, where I discovered they had done exploratory surgery and found cancer in the pancreas. Janet asked me, "Will you go into his room with me to tell him?" "Of course." She led me into the room, then slipped around me and left the room so it was just me and Tom.

Tom was lying on his side in bed. As I approached him, he said "Hi, Stan. The news isn't good, is it?" I said, "No, Tom, it's not good." He said, "It's cancer, isn't it?" "Yes," I answered. "It's cancer." A pained expression came over Tom's face, and then he rolled over onto his back. Staring straight up at the ceiling, he

began to speak slowly, firmly, "Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord!" Five times he said it.

The hair on the back of my neck began to prickle. I realized that Tom was no longer speaking to me. He was confessing his faith in Jesus Christ. He had not moved into our town as a God-seeker but God has sought him. He had discovered the wonder of Jesus and then moved to the awe of believing in Jesus. It was me that day who experienced both wonder and awe, seeing this dear man in his hardest moment affirm his trust in Jesus.

In the year that Tom was given to live, I watched him minister to his family and lead both his mother and one of his dear friends to Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> His son, Mark, was only eleven at the time. Years later, Mark called me to say that he had just graduated from the Naval Academy and wondered what I, as a friend of his father, could tell him about his Dad. So I told him why his father was (and still is) the most courageous man I had ever known, that he loved Jesus, that he loved his mother, Janet, his sister, Christy, and him. By the end of the phone call, we were both a mess—but a wonderful mess. Jesus loved that family then and loves them still today just as he loves you.

If you would see your life move from wonder to awe then open your heart to receive Jesus into your life, I encourage you to pray with me right now or in the privacy of your own home. Jesus says, “Behold. I stand at the door—the door of your life—and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in” (Revelation 3:20 RSV). This can be The Easter of your entire life. Simply open the door, receive Jesus into your life and, if you would like to do that, I invite you to pray this prayer with me silently as I pray it out loud:

“Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor, from this moment forward, to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence

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<sup>2</sup>Ott, E. Stanley, *The Joy of Discipling*, Zondervan, pp. 22-24.

so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus' name. Amen.”

If you prayed that prayer you can know that the Lord who loves you now and forever lives within you. Start reading the Gospel of John in the New Testament and grow to know this dearest friend of your heart.