



MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS

March 27, 2016, The Resurrection of the Lord

I Corinthians 15: 19-26, 50-55; Luke 24: 1-12

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Theme: God is a mystery, fearsome and gracious.

Almighty God, you transcend mortal imaginings; your truth lies on the far side of our most articulate of words; your power overpowers our modest expectations. Startle us this Easter Day with truth stranger and more wonderful than any we could ever imagine. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Saying anything in Latin gives it a little more *gravitas*. *Gravitas* is itself a Latin word, and because it's Latin, it has extra, well, *gravitas*. The title of this sermon is not ancient Latin. The phrase, used to describe God, is only a century old. It was coined by a towering German theologian named Rudolph Otto. He could have said it in German, but he chose Latin. As a description of God, Otto's phrase has stuck – at least the first two words have stuck. People still speak of God as the *Mysterium Tremendum*, though they often misunderstand what Professor Otto meant by *Tremendum*, and they forget to add the last two words, the *et Fascinans*.

Tremendum doesn't mean "tremendous." It means something like "fearsome," or "awesome," even "terrifying." Otto's other two words to describe God, the two often forgotten, the *et Fascinans* part, mean just about the opposite. *Fascinans* means something like "attractive," even "merciful" or "gracious." So there you have professor Otto's fancy Latin for God – "The Mystery that is Fearsome and Gracious."

"Fearsome and gracious" is exactly what we heard in those two Bible passages that Ellsworth and Kent read, both of them about the Easter mystery – the Resurrection.



In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul struggles for words sleek enough to speak the lightening of Resurrection. He tangles himself up in brave metaphors groping to explain the inexplicable: “*What I am saying...*” he writes, “*is that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit imperishability. Listen,*” he concludes, “*I will tell you a mystery...*” In that second reading, the Easter story from Luke’s Gospel, the words used to describe the disciples’ reaction to Resurrection are “perplexed,” “terrified,” and “amazed.” Rudolph Otto had it right about God of Easter – “*Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans.*”

Many of you know that a few years ago our church engaged in a two-year study funded by the Templeton Foundation focusing on the intersection of science and religion. It was wide-ranging, but the corner that most fascinated me was what’s called “cosmology.” Cosmology is a division of physics that studies the origin, development and the nature of the universe. While it does not prove that God exists, cosmology – especially after Einstein’s theory of relativity – does demonstrate that the universe is far stranger, more mysterious, indeed more counter-intuitive that you can imagine. The often-bizarre conclusions of modern cosmology don’t prove God, but they do point in the direction of transcendence. Modern cosmology turns us toward the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. Three examples:

Cosmology example one – the Big Bang theory. The Big Bang says that the universe came into being at one moment in time, out of nothing and from who knows where. The old scientific notion had been that the universe had always existed, as is. When the Big Bang was first hinted at in the 1920’s, many scientists rejected the evidence because they thought it smacked of religion. If the universe had a beginning, it suggested some sort of creator. The Big Bang sounded disturbingly like the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* – more Latin, sorry – “creation out of nothing.” Today, the Big Bang with its theological overtones is universally accepted by scientists. What a *Mysterium*.



Cosmology example two – “fine-tuning.” Science has discovered that there are any number of “laws of nature” – the precise force of gravity being just one of many – that are “fine-tuned” to incredible precision to permit the development of life. If any one of them were off infinitesimally, life could not exist. These laws of nature don’t have to be what they are; they just are. The odds are about zero. The inescapable conclusion is that universe seems to have been designed for life. Fred Hoyle, the Cambridge University astronomer put it this way, “*A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect was monkeying with the physics.*” Hoyle was not a believer, but his “super-intellect” sure sounds a lot like God. What a *Mysterium*.

Cosmological example three – “entanglement.” Einstein’s theory of general relativity said that if you take two pieces of the universe – electrons – that are in a relationship with each other and become entangled and if you separate them – even to opposite ends of the universe – and then affect one, the other one will also be instantaneously affected, even if it’s a zillion miles away. Though implied by his theory, Einstein actually didn’t like the implications. He called it “*spooky action at a distance,*” and figured he must be wrong about something. Well, just this last fall, scientists were able to perform definitive experiments that proved entanglement was real. They diddle with one entangled micro-object and its entangled partner on the other side of the Canary Islands reacted immediately. So the universe is actually somehow interconnected across vast distances in a way we can’t figure out. Looks rather like prayer or miracle. What a *Mysterium*.

A favorite aphorism of several scientists who’ve gone deep into cosmology is this line, “*Not only is the universe stranger than we think, it is stranger that we can think.*”

About now you’re doubtless asking yourself what this little foray into modern cosmology has to do with Easter. The connection is this: Resurrection is strange; Resurrection is mysterious, Resurrection is inexplicable. Well, modern cosmology says that the *whole universe, reality itself, life, everything,* is mysterious, strange, and often inexplicable. Resurrection is hardly stranger or more mysterious than



this strange and mysterious universe we live in. The mystery of Resurrection conforms to the mystery of the cosmos.

Albert Einstein spent the last 22 years of his life at 112 Mercer Street in Princeton, New Jersey, right across the street from Princeton Theological Seminary. During his years there, the seminary decided to move its chapel, named Miller Chapel after Samuel Miller, an early professor of the seminary who had, incidentally, been assistant minister here at Brick Church. Miller Chapel is a lovely little Greek Revival box, not very large. Einstein was among those on hand to watch the moving operation, quite a sight even though it was only going a few hundred yards across campus. The story has it that as he watched Miller Chapel slowly lumber by, Einstein quipped, *“I hope they don’t think they can keep God in that little box.”*

Good point, Albert! Actually, without knowing it, Einstein affirmed a classic Christian doctrine. One of the core affirmations of our faith has always been this: “What Jesus Christ shows us about God is wholly true, but what Jesus shows us is not the entire truth about God.” That is to say, even though what Jesus shows us about God is trustworthy, God will always remain bigger than anything we are capable of knowing about God.

What God shows us in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is that despite appearances to the contrary, God is stronger than death. Despite pancreatic cancer, despite terrorist bombs, despite numbing despair and grinding poverty, despite Roman crosses, despite anything, death will not have the last word. By God, life will have the last word.

Each of the two Bible passages we heard earlier end exactly there: First the Gospel – *“Peter got up and ran to the tomb..., he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”*

And then Paul in the Epistle – *“Death has been swallowed up in victory” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”*



The ultimate reality of the universe is the God Rudolph Otto named the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*.

God is *Mysterium* – beyond us, lying always the other side of mortal comprehension, bigger than any box into which we might try to squeeze the Divine.

God is *Tremendum* – wholly other, awesome and inexplicable, in the language of today’s Scripture, “perplexing,” “terrifying,” and “amazing.”

But finally, the Resurrection assures us that God is also *Fascinans*. That is to say at the heart of this mysterious universe is a Divine Reality who is attractive, gracious, compassionate, merciful, lovely and loving. And this, dear ones, this brave declaration that the *Mysterium* is not just *Tremendum*, but also *Fascinans*, this changes everything, and all for the better. By the Resurrection, the God of quarks and a hundred billion galaxies has declared:

that grace abounds,
that love triumphs,
and that, in the end, life wins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.