

Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these.²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

²⁴ “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.²⁵ I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

²⁸ “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice²⁹ and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.³⁰ By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. (John 5:19-30)

Be Amazed!

What does “amazing” mean? I did a quick internet search this week for “most amazing.” Do you know what I found? The top ten most amazing YouTube videos. The 35 most amazing travel photos from around the world. The world’s most amazing desert hotels. And thousands more like that. It made me wonder: have we forgotten what the word “amazing” actually means? I looked it up and the definition I found said, “causing great surprise, astonishing.” Do travel photos ever actually astonish us? A YouTube video might cause us great surprise, but how often, really? And desert hotels? It seems to me that we often use words like “amazing” to mean just “out of the ordinary.” I guess there’s nothing wrong with that. But in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about doing things that would amaze the people he was talking to. And he meant a whole lot more than an unusual YouTube video. He was telling these people that they were going to see and hear things that would totally contradict everything they expected to be true about him. As we listen to what Jesus told them, my friends, see if you can recapture some of the wonder that God intends for us to feel about our Savior. **Be amazed!**

I.

Now, the words Jesus speaks here are deep. But he was talking about all that he would do for us. **Be amazed! This man raises the dead!** Now, we’ve heard that all our lives. But the people Jesus was talking to hadn’t. They couldn’t see his power as God. They could only see his human flesh. The only time that they could tell that Jesus was more than a man was when he did a miracle. Luther was a very earthy writer and at least once, he gave a description of Jesus’ physicality that underlines bodily functions in way that I wouldn’t really be comfortable preaching. But his point was true: Jesus wasn’t an angel or some other-worldly creature. He wasn’t just a form God took like he did in the Old Testament. Jesus was a real man. And it was hard to imagine that real, solid, normal human being doing things that only God can do.

But Jesus was true God. He points to the fact that he has life in himself just as God the Father as life in himself. He means that he has the power to give life even to the dead. Jesus points to two ways that he does that. First he says, **“I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”** What’s he talking about? I’ll give you hint: it’s *not* the resurrection. He says “the time has now come” to give life to the dead and the time for the resurrection clearly hasn’t come yet. He’s talking about giving life to those who are dead in sin and unbelief. Every unbeliever is spiritually dead. Today, zombie movies are incredibly popular and in a sense, I suppose you could say that every day of life on this world is like an episode of *The Walking Dead*. There are spiritually dead people all around us. Now, their bodies aren’t rotting like on that TV show. But spiritually speaking, they are dead.

No human being has the power to give spiritual life to himself or herself. You and I don't believe because we made a choice to do so. We don't believe because we're smarter or more spiritual than other people. We were born just as dead in sin as everybody else. But Jesus came to us in the gospel and he reached into our hearts and he made us alive. To God there is only one kind of life. You are his living, breathing child or you aren't. If you are, then even physical death cannot defeat you. Jesus said, **"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."** He's talking about the other way Jesus gives life. On Judgment Day all the dead will rise.

Jesus was saying, "You think giving people faith is amazing? Well, I'm going to do more than that. I'm going to raise their bodies from the dead!" Why is that so much more amazing? Because we've never seen it! We see people who are alive spiritually all the time. But we don't encounter dead people rising and living. Jesus uses very pointed language here – "those who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out." I think this must have really struck them because of their burial practices. For less than two hundred years right around the time of Christ, the Jews adopted an unusual burial practice. When someone died, they would lay his or her body in a tomb cut out of the rock, just like Jesus himself was later buried in. They would anoint it with spices and dress it in a cheap linen burial robe. And then they would leave it and let it decompose. When all the flesh was rotted off, they would come back and collect the bones and put them into a box called an ossuary. Sometimes, they would inscribe the name of the person on the box and then they would leave it in another part of the tomb. Then there was room to lay out another body.

So Jesus was talking to people who knew that their many of their loved ones were just a pile of bones in a little box. And he said that those people will hear his voice and come out of their graves. So today, we can think of all those people who have been embalmed and buried in a coffin and all those people who have been cremated and their ashes are standing on the mantle of someone's fireplace. We can think of all those people who were eaten by sharks. All those who are in their graves, whatever kind of grave it might be, will rise on Judgment Day.

That's the power of the risen Christ. Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh and entered this world. That's the amazing thing! God the mighty Maker became a part of what he made so that he can rescue us from sin and death. God the Son knelt down to this world and died and paid for our sins so that he can raise us from the dead and lift us back up to God. That starts on the day he raises us from spiritual death to spiritual life. It continues on the day we die here and go to heaven. But it finds its greatest fulfillment on that day when Jesus will return and call us out of the grave and remake this world. We will live with him in joy forever.

II.

But even that wasn't the limit of what Jesus said to amaze his audience. I suppose they could've dismissed what he said by pointing out that once or twice in the Old Testament, a prophet raised someone from the dead and they weren't God. But they did not have life in themselves like Jesus had. He owned the power to give life. Jesus pushed his point even farther than that. He claimed God's own role of judging his creation. **Be amazed! This man will judge the world.**

In the Old Testament, Abraham called God "the Judge of all the earth." Jesus says, **"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him."** We've all confessed over and over again that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. God the Father entrusted that role to his Son so that the whole world honors the Son just like they honor the Father. That would only make sense if Jesus was doing something that only God can do. The New Testament tells us several times that on Judgment Day, all people, even God's enemies will acknowledge that Jesus is God and Lord. Sadly, for his enemies, that will be part of their judgment. They will have to acknowledge the Lord they defied all their lives. For us, it will be different. We will praise him as the Lord we always knew he was. So already today, we praise him as the true Son of God that he is.

Jesus draws a line here between those who will be saved and those who won't. If you don't honor the Son, you don't honor the Father. Those were hard words for the Jews to hear because they thought they did honor the Father. But without faith in Jesus, even Jewish people will not go to heaven, to say nothing of Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists; or even Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons who do not honor Jesus like they honor the Father because they deny he is the true Son of God. The same is true for people who are spiritual but

not religious, or people who are really nice, that we really like and think God should let into heaven. Only people who trust in Jesus will be saved.

How can that be true? When he's talking about the resurrection, doesn't Jesus say that those who have done good will rise to live while those who done evil will rise to be condemned? Yes, he does. But we have to consider his words in the light of all that the Bible says. St. Paul says that nothing good lives in us, that is, in our sinful nature. In another place, Jesus himself says that no one does good except for God alone. So on one level, when Jesus says that those who have done good will rise to live, that should chill us to the bone. Have we done good? Our first answer might be, "Sure, there was that time that I shoveled the walk for that elderly lady next door and the time I gave money to that veteran who was homeless." And most of us could probably make long lists of all the good things we think we've done. But what about our sins? How many of those are there on our list? How many times do we need to shovel the walk for that elderly lady next door to offset the times we held a grudge against our wife or our husband? How many dollars do we have to give to how many homeless veterans to offset all the times we disrespected our parents or failed to discipline our children in love? And what about all the times we drove past those veterans without giving them a dime? If we think we can claim the good things, what about the evil we've done? When and how can we ever come out ahead?

The truth is, we can't. Because in God's eyes, all our righteous acts are still filthy rags. They're all contaminated by our sin. As St. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That includes you and me. But he goes on to say that all "are justified freely by his grace." God turned a loving heart to us and he sent his Son Jesus to take all our sin away. That Son was true God so that his perfect life would count for all of us, and so that his death would pay for every sinner who ever lived. But he was also a true man so that he could indeed live under the law like we do and so that he could die. Jesus has paid for our sins. Because he gave us life – he gave us faith – God now sees us as holy and righteous.

So on Judgment Day, Jesus will do something special for us. When he comes back, he will raise the dead and transform the living. He will gather all people who ever lived and he will pronounce judgment on us all. But when he reviews our lives, when he plays the video that contains every word and action that we've ever done and at the same time, plays every secret thought that we kept to ourselves and every sinful desire that we thought no one else every knew about – when Jesus plays our life in his court as evidence, all our sin will be omitted. In place of every one of our sins, he will show his perfect life and his perfect heart. So we will be portrayed as perfect. And every fruit of our faith, every time we shoveled that neighbor's walk or helped that homeless veteran because Jesus put life and faith into our hearts, that Jesus will show. He will find that we have done good all our lives. So we will rise to live.

Now, how much did I tell you today that you didn't already know? Possibly nothing. But today, God calls us to renew our sense of wonder at what the Son of God has done for us. That man who seemed so much like any other Jewish man was and is our Savior. We live spiritually today because he has given us life. We will rise from the dead and live in a new and perfect world because he conquered death and hell for us. In an instant, he will judge the world and declare that we have been holy and perfect because he did all that for us. As we wait for that day to come, be amazed, my friends. Amen.