

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.”

8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

## EARTHQUAKE

Today’s story begins with an earthquake.

We’ve seen these past few months that an earthquake can change everything. What we thought was solid ground becomes a quivering mass of jello. Great cracks appear in the ground.

In an instant thousands can be killed or injured. Thousands more can be made homeless. Once productive farmland is rendered uninhabitable. A vital modern country is taken back to the Stone Age.

And the aftershocks of such an event keep everyone on edge. Earthquakes can make us feel powerless and small. Earthquakes make us feel afraid.

It’s no wonder that the Bible uses the earthquake as an apocalyptic sign. The end of the world as we know it is hailed by earthquakes in diverse places. And the beginning of that end occurred long ago when an earthquake struck a tomb just outside of Jerusalem.

The earth trembled. The stone was rolled away. And nothing has been the same ever since.

## NO SECURITY

We human beings seek security. We don’t want any earthquakes interrupting our settled lives.

We post guards to keep anything or anyone from intruding. We invest in elaborate alarm systems. We seek insurance to cover our losses and keep our deepest fears at bay.

But, the power of this earthquake shook the whole world. The power of this earthquake even shook up those who made it their business to control others with a reign of terror.

I am fascinated by the fact that even a dead Jesus is a danger to the political and religious authorities. Even after they crucified him the religious leaders want a guard posted around the tomb. They said, "We don't want those nefarious disciples stealing the body and then claiming that Jesus rose from the dead."

Of course the disciples didn't seem like much of a threat. They had all run away and were in hiding. But, even in death some thought that Jesus was a man to be watched.

As it turns out they had a point. The guard posted by Pilate was not enough to do the job. When heaven came down and glory filled the earth, not even the bravest soldier could do his job.

No one is a match for an earthquake, especially when that earthquake is heaven sent. The guards were literally all shook up. When the guards got just one glimpse of God's angel, the Bible tells us that they became like "dead men."

Isn't it ironic that the one who was supposed to be dead is alive, and the ones who were supposed to be guarding the tomb are like dead men?

## THE WOMEN

The only ones who manage to maintain consciousness are the women who came to see the tomb. The women see more than an earthquake and a frightening apparition. They see an angel, a messenger of God who delivers a word of unspeakable hope. The angel says,

"Don't be afraid. I know you're seeking Jesus who was crucified. He's not here. He has been raised as he said. Come see the place where he lay, and then go and tell his disciples. He goes ahead of you into Galilee."

In all of the gospel accounts of the resurrection, the first witnesses are women.

In the ancient world women were not allowed to be witnesses. They couldn't testify in court. You see the prejudice against women in Luke's gospel. The women come and tell the disciples about the empty tomb and the risen Christ. And what do the disciples do? They dismiss the story as an "idle tale".

And yet the women are the only ones courageous enough to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. The women are the only ones loving enough to pay their respects at the tomb.

And the women are the first to see the empty tomb and hear the word of unspeakable hope. Christ the Lord is raised today, the first fruits of those who will be raised from the dead in the age to come.

The women take what the angel says to heart. They are filled with great joy, and they strike out to tell the disciples what they have seen.

But, along with the joy they still feel fear. Can you blame them?

They are living in a world where the ground does not stay put under their feet and where at least one of the dead has not stayed dead. The Easter earthquake changes everything; fear and joy now live side by side.

#### A GRACIOUS GOOD MORNING

And on the way to tell the disciples they meet the risen Jesus. And what did Jesus say?

“Greetings” or “Good morning!” It was a common greeting, but it is transformed by uncommon circumstances. The root Greek word is related to our word for grace. So, the first word of the risen Jesus is a word of grace.

We see the grace in the message that Jesus gives. First, Jesus repeats the message of the angel. He says, “Don’t be afraid.”

And then he tells the women to go and tell his “brothers” to meet him in Galilee. Notice how Jesus refers to the men who had run away and denied him in his hour of need. They are his brothers.

Though they had abandoned Jesus, Jesus does not abandon them. He goes ahead of them. He is waiting for them in Galilee with a word of grace and forgiveness.

“Do not be afraid.” That is the message of the angel and the message of the risen Christ. And that is God’s message to us as well.

When someone dies we are often filled with guilt. We wonder if we could have done something differently. We wonder if we could have been more faithful when our loved one was alive.

The guilt experienced by those who loved Jesus must have been overwhelming. They deserted Jesus and denied him. No one was able to do anything but look as the grisly scene of the crucifixion unfolded.

## EASTER EARTHQUAKE

The earthquake and the resurrection are signs that the end is at hand. But, today we learn a surprising truth. The end is not a time of judgment for those who failed Jesus. The end is not a fiery apocalyptic nightmare.

The end is an era of grace in which the glory of God restores fallen brothers and sisters. Sin is forgiven and cowardice is replaced with courage and an inner peace. “Go and tell my brothers... that I am going ahead of them and will meet them in Galilee.”

The women are starting to understand this now that they have seen the risen Christ and have worshipped at his feet.

And I hope you are starting to understand that as well. The Easter earthquake is different. It's not about destruction and despair. The Easter earthquake is about hope and restoration.

The Easter earthquake is not about judgment and revenge. The Easter earthquake is about grace and forgiveness. The power of the resurrection is this power of forgiveness.

## RESURRECTED DISCIPLES

The people saw it in the actions of the disciples. They changed after they met the risen Christ. Those first Christians no longer cowered behind locked doors. They proclaimed the good news of the resurrection boldly.

Those who had been so afraid now were filled with an amazing confidence. They had a security that came from within because they were filled with the Spirit of the risen Christ.

They were not afraid of the people who scoffed at their claims. They were not afraid of the authorities. They did not obey when the authorities threatened them and told them to stop talking about Jesus.

Grace had set them free. Fear no longer ruled their lives.

What about you? Has the Easter earthquake changed your life? Are you controlled by guilt and despair? Are you afraid of what someone might do to you?

Or have you heard the word of the angels and the word of our Savior?

## DON'T BE AFRAID

Don't be afraid. That command is found throughout the Bible. In order to trust the promises of God we have to get beyond our fears. We have to be touched by the Spirit of the risen Christ.

Fear is the antithesis of faith. Fear is the tool that the powers that be still use in an attempt to control us. How many politicians appeal to our fears when they are trying to get elected? Almost all of them. How many commercials appeal to our fears to get us to buy something? Almost all of them.

But, if the stone has been rolled away from the tomb, if the guards posted by Pilate have fallen harmlessly to the ground, what do we have to fear? If death the final enemy has been destroyed, why do we mourn as if we have no hope?

There are still good reasons to be afraid.

There are people who mean to harm us. There are bad things that happen to us and to the ones we love.

Some bad things happened to those first disciples as well. Many of them died for the faith that they proclaimed.

But, though they were threatened, those early disciples were not defined by the threats that surrounded them. Someone else's power over them did not become the only thing that they knew about themselves.

They also knew that even after all their mistakes and all their cowardice and fear, Jesus came back to them. He had gone ahead of them to Galilee. And he promised to be with them till the close of the age.

#### THE NEVER ENDING STORY

When you read the stories of the resurrection in the gospels, they are very brief, and none of them seem to have what we might call a satisfactory ending. In fact, the gospel of Mark ends in the middle of sentence!

There's so much more we would like to know. What did the risen Christ look like? What else did he say? Inquiring minds want to know.

But, I would suggest that the brevity of the resurrection accounts teach their own lesson. Resurrection is not just about the risen Christ meeting some discouraged women then and there. It's also about the Spirit of the risen Christ meeting discouraged disciples here and now.

It's like the hymn that we sang to open our service this morning. Jesus Christ is risen today.

It is a story that continues. And it continues with you and me.

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Just as Jesus went on ahead of his disciples and met them in Galilee so Jesus goes on ahead of us. Don't worry about the future. Jesus is ahead of us. Jesus goes beyond us. Jesus waits for us. There is no need to fear.

Yes, the earth is still filled with terrible signs. There are wars and rumors of wars. There are earthquakes that shake what we thought was solid ground.

But, we have met the risen Christ on the road back home. And that changes everything.

## THE EVIDENCE OF CHANGED LIVES

We can't argue people into the kingdom of heaven. We can't make people believe in the resurrection by presenting our evidence that demands a verdict. There is always another explanation for resurrection, for something that has never happened before or since.

The greatest evidence for the resurrection is still found in the lives of those who have experienced the power of the risen Christ. The greatest evidence is still in the testimony of those whose lives have been touched by his Spirit.

This was true in the first century when timid disciples were turned into brave proponents of the gospel. They insisted to their own death that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead.

And even today there are disciples who make the same claim in the face of terrible odds. There are Christians who live lives of discipleship that make no sense if Jesus has not been raised.

They present a powerful witness to a death-dealing world. It is our job to join this chorus of witnesses.

## HE IS RISEN

About 1930 a communist leader journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly. His subject was atheism, the official dogma of the party.

For a solid hour he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, hurling powerful arguments and ridicule at the faith. At last he was finished and viewed what he thought to be the smoldering ashes of the Christian faith.

He asked with a sneer, "Are there any questions?"

A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the communist. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man looked to his left and then to his right.

Finally, he shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, "Christ is risen!"

The vast assembly arose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of an earthquake, "He is risen indeed!"

Apparently the power of the Easter earthquake had traveled all the way to Kiev in the Soviet Union.

The Easter earthquake reminds us that the death-dealing world will not have the final word. The final word comes from the risen Christ.

And it is not a word of cosmic destruction. It is a word of cosmic creation.

It is a word about a new heaven and a new earth. It is a word about grace that is greater than all our sins.

Christ still finds us along the road of life. His Spirit greets us with a cheerful word of grace, "Good morning."

But, sometimes we forget how good the morning really is.

This is no ordinary day. Jesus Christ is risen today. And his message to us is this, "Don't be afraid."

And now comes the time when you get to participate in the Easter earthquake. Let's see if we can say it loud enough that the Methodists can hear us down the street! Are you ready?

He is risen!  
He is risen indeed!

Indeed.

Amen.