

“Earthquake”

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Matthew 28:1-10

1 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

Last week Jesus entered Jerusalem. The crowd that followed him cheered as if he were a king.

But, the people of Jerusalem were not so happy.
In fact, the Bible tells us that the whole city was in a turmoil.

The word translated turmoil is the same word often used to describe an earthquake. The people of Jerusalem were “all shook up” by what Jesus was doing and saying.

And this was just the beginning.
I ended last Sunday’s sermon by telling you to brace yourself.

More earthquakes are on the way.
And when those earthquakes come, things will never be the same again.

The earthquakes begin with a crucifixion.
Jesus is unjustly accused by the political and religious leaders.

And finally he is nailed to a cross by the people he loved and came to save.

The sun refuses to shine.
Darkness covers the earth.

And in this dark hour,
Jesus cries from the cross,
“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus dies.

But, at the moment of death, the ground beneath the cross comes alive
... an earthquake.

This was no ordinary earthquake.
The curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple is torn from top to bottom.
Boulders crumble.

It was enough to wake the dead.

Oh wait.
That happened too.
Tombs cracked open.
Saints were raised from the dead.

What's going on here?
The old world seems to be passing away.
It's the end of the world as they knew it.

And even those that were in charge of the crucifixion recognized the power of God at work.
They said,

“Look at what's happening.
This man must have been God's Son!”

Once again the truth about Jesus comes from unexpected people and places.

The blind man is the only one that can “see” that Jesus is the Messiah.
The children in the Temple proclaim the grown up truth that Jesus is the King, the Son of David.

And now the enemy, the Romans who are crucifying Jesus proclaim the greatest truth of all. In the wake of this life giving earthquake, they call Jesus God's Son.

My how things have changed.
Jesus has been unjustly tried, mocked, beaten and crucified. It really did look like God had abandoned Jesus.

Yet, just a moment after his death the world is shaken to it's foundation.

And this is just the beginning.
It is a new creation.
More earthquakes will follow.

Observing all this ... from a distance ... were many women. These women had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.

Two women in particular are singled out ...
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph.

The ancient world was a man's world where women were always in the background ... defined not by who they were but by the men in their life. The story of the resurrection will be different.

In this story it is the women who will come to the foreground.
The women have the most courage.
The women see most clearly.

The earthquake does not cause the women to run away. Instead, they draw near.

They come to see what will happen next.

A GUARDED TOMB

But, in the meantime there is the question of Jesus' burial.

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who was one of Jesus' disciples asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. And Pilate agreed to give it to him.

Joseph had recently bought a tomb for himself.
But, now he lays Jesus to rest in this place.

This tomb is quite elaborate.
It was cut out of rock, and a heavy stone is rolled across the entrance.

Two of the women Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” are the only ones who dare to come even closer.

They sit opposite the tomb and keep watch.

What are they looking for?

Jesus is dead.

He’s in a very secure tomb.

But, apparently he’s still a man to be watched.

This is true not only of disciples but also of adversaries.

The religious leaders come to Pilate and say,
“When this imposter was alive he said that he was going to rise from the dead after three days.

We’re afraid his disciples will come and steal the body. That will make things even worse.

They will say that he has been raised from the dead.

Why don’t we put a guard in front of the tomb for three days?”

Pilate agreed.

Not only did he provide guards for the tomb; he also sealed the tomb.

I am fascinated by the fact that even a dead Jesus is a danger to the political and religious authorities.

He was (as the Creed puts it) “crucified, dead and buried.”

But, now they want a guard posted around the tomb.

Even in death some thought that Jesus was a man to be watched.
Some watched out of fear.

Two women watched with expectation.

Pilate told them to make the tomb
“as secure as you can.”

Turns out that’s easier said than done.

HEAVEN CAME DOWN

The next day, the first day of the week Mary Magdalene and the other Mary return again very early in the morning, just as the sun is coming up over the horizon.

In Matthew’s gospel they don’t come to finish preparing the body for burial.

They come to “see the tomb”.

That’s strange.

Why would these women come at the crack of dawn to see a tomb?

A sealed, guarded tomb is not going anywhere.

They could visit any time.

Right?

My Greek dictionary said that in this context the verb translated “see” means more than just to look at something. It means to “view attentively”.

These women come to the tomb with a sense of expectation. They might not know what is going to happen next, but they expect something to happen.

They’re not disappointed.

Earthquake.

But, this is no ordinary earthquake.
There's a crack in the universe.
Heaven came down.

The angel of the Lord rolls away the stone in front of the grave

... and then sits on it!

The angel is fearsome.
Face like lightning.
Sparkling white garments reflect the very glory of God.

And the Roman guards?
Scared stiff.
Like dead men.

And the dead man inside the tomb?
Not so dead.

THE MESSAGE

The women are afraid too, but they do manage to maintain consciousness. And this fearsome angel tells the trembling women that there's no need for them to fear.

He said,

"I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.

Come, see the place where he lay.

And after you've seen, go quickly and tell the disciples,

‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’”

The women leave the tomb with conflicting emotions.

They are still afraid.
But they are also filled with great joy.

THE GREETING

And while they are on the way to give the disciples the message from the angel, suddenly Jesus appears to them.

What does Jesus say?
“Greetings”
“Good morning!”

A common greeting.
But it’s transformed by uncommon circumstances.

It’s interesting to note that the root Greek word is related to our word for grace.

That makes sense.
The first word from the risen Jesus is a word of grace.

The two Marys grab hold of Jesus’ feet and worship him. Fear and great joy are once again mingled.

Jesus reinforces the message of the angel,
“Don’t be afraid.
Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee.
There they will see me.”

Notice how Jesus refers to the men who had run away and denied him in his hour of need.

Brothers.

They had abandoned Jesus.

But, Jesus does not abandon them.

He goes ahead of them.

He is waiting for them in Galilee with a word of grace and forgiveness.

The risen Christ is bringing new life to the world.

And job one is to resurrect the lives of broken and discouraged disciples.

HE IS GOING AHEAD OF YOU

In Matthew's gospel resurrection is earthshaking.

Resurrection is heaven coming to earth.

Resurrection defeats the powers of the unjust.

Resurrection creates fear.

Resurrection takes away fear.

But, more than anything else resurrection causes disciples to move to a new location.

Resurrection prompts disciples to go and tell the story.

The women were able to overcome fear because they experienced the presence of the risen Christ.

It all happened "as he said" it would.

Those three little words are important.

Three times in Matthew's gospel Jesus tried to tell his disciples about his death and resurrection, but the disciples couldn't accept the message.

So, now the angel reminds the women and the disciples that this really shouldn't come as a surprise. It is part of the plan. It all happened "as he said".

The women went to the tomb to see what they couldn't imagine. They came with a sense of anticipation. They came filled with fear.

But, they left with fear and great joy.
Death was no more.
The angel rolled the stone away and sat on it.

And now Jesus is going to meet them in Galilee. The angel put it this way; "He is going ahead of you into Galilee."

That's another thing that the resurrection teaches us.
Jesus was ahead of them, all of them.

Jesus was ahead of the political and religious authorities that sought to destroy him.
He was ahead the disciples that ran away and hid. He was ahead of the women that came to the tomb.

And Jesus is ahead of us as well.

Most of us come to Easter thinking that we know what to expect. We know the story of the empty tomb and the story of those who saw the risen Christ. Every year we hear the story.

We dress in our Easter best.
We watch the kids pick up Easter eggs.
We look forward to a nice meal with family and friends after the service.

It's all very familiar and reassuring.

RISEN TODAY

But, suppose the story is about more than what happened way back when?

Suppose the risen Christ goes ahead of us? Suppose he still meets us suddenly and unexpectedly?

I believe he does.

Just as the resurrection of Jesus disrupted the world long ago, our world is still being disrupted by that same power.

Easter is not a tame celebration of spring.
Easter is a new creation.
Easter is a time when fear and joy still live side by side.

We can try to deny it.
We can try to seal him in the grave and leave him there.

That's been tried before.
Didn't work the first time.
Won't work now.

A risen Lord can't be contained and controlled.

Despite the best efforts of the religious and political authorities the word about the resurrection got out. The word got out because Jesus met his disciples in Galilee.

And in Galilee the power and authority of the risen Christ was passed on to his disciples.

Galilee was that place where the disciples first heard the call and started following Jesus.

And so, Jesus meets them there to reset the clock. They are being given a second chance to be his disciples.

This time, by the power of the Spirit, they will proclaim the story of Jesus throughout the world. Resurrection will be about more than just the raising of Jesus from the dead.

It will be about the coming of God's kingdom and a hope that is eternal.

The women watched with anticipation by the tomb. They were expecting an earthquake, and they were not disappointed.

Now we have joined their vigil.
In the face of death we do not despair.

Instead, we wait with expectation.
More earthquakes are on the way!

We don't know when or how they will come.
But, this we do know.

The stone has been rolled away.
The new creation has begun.

And God has called us to spread the word.

RESURRECTION AND MISSION

In Matthew's gospel the effect of resurrection is a call to mission.

On a mountain in Galilee the disciples meet the risen Christ, and they worship him.

And the risen Jesus gives his disciples a job to do. We call it the Great Commission.

He told them, "Make disciples of all nations."

And then he gave his disciples a promise;

"I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The risen Jesus gives us that same commission and that same promise.

He calls us to make disciples by telling our story of faith. We go and tell others how the Spirit of the risen Christ has changed our lives.

And he reminds us that no matter where we go he is always with us.

The hymn has it right.

"Jesus Christ is risen today."

The power of the risen Christ is a present reality.

The death-dealing world will not have the final word. The final word comes from the risen Christ.

And it's is not a word of cosmic destruction.

It's a word of cosmic creation.

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

The message of the resurrection can be summarized in these three statements:

Jesus is with us.

Jesus goes ahead of us.

Jesus prepares the way.

Jesus is (as the Bible puts it) the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith".

He has blazed the trail for us, and he invites us to follow him. He leads us into the future.

He invites us to go to our Galilee, that place where we were first called.

In that place we will see him.

In that place we will have the joy of our salvation restored.

In that place we will be forgiven.

In that place we will worship him.

In that place the risen Christ will resurrect dead faith and broken disciples.

And in that place we will be commissioned to go and tell what we have seen and what we have heard.

WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD

The greatest evidence for the resurrection is still found in the lives of those who have experienced the power of the risen Christ.

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.

And it is our job to join this chorus of witnesses.

MICHAEL

Several weeks ago I heard this story on National Public Radio. It was about a man who was recently killed by a rebel group in the Congo.

His name was Michael Sharp. He was a part of a peace initiative sponsored by the Mennonite church.

The reporter from NPR described him as a “34 year old man from Kansas who had a round face and a penchant for plaid shirts”.

Not long ago he would walk unarmed deep into rebel held territory in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And there he would sit in the shade of the banana trees with rebels and exchange stories.

Michael listened as the rebels talked about their understanding of the past, mythical stories that allowed them to justify their own violence.

It was Michael’s ability to listen and understand their story deeply that allowed him to emerge from the jungle unscathed. He took the time to really hear these rebels before he began to speak.

The reporter said that he was struck by Michael’s kindness and optimism, but also by his “determination to engage in dialogue with violent people who perceived the world so differently from how he did.”

Michael and his fellow Mennonite church workers were able to do what few were able to do. After every trip, they would be followed days later by rebels who had been persuaded to surrender and give up the fight.

His team persuaded at least 1,600 rebels to abandon the jungle and give up the fight.

Michael eventually lost his life doing this work.
But, why did he do it?

Why did he go so far and risk so much?

Maybe he heard the words of the one who went before him. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God."
(Matthew 5:9)

This is just one story.
There are many, many more.

Ever since that first earthquake, there have been people who wait and watch for the next tremor.
They even wait and watch at the tomb.

And when the earthquake comes fear is tempered with great joy.
And they go out into the world to preach good news.

He is risen. He goes ahead of you.
He prepares the way.

Amen.