

Earthquaking Fear, Faith, and Joy

Acts 10:34-43

1 Corinthians 15:12-26,51-58

Matthew 27:50-54, 28:1-10, 16-20

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Easter Sunday

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I

“Christ is risen!” “He is risen Indeed!” These triumphant words we shout and sing, and announce on trumpets and organ, declare the greatest news ever to come on the face of the earth, indeed the greatest news anywhere throughout the cosmos. Jesus Christ has done battle with sin, death and hell itself and won! Life has conquered death! The last enemy- death- has been destroyed. The ancient exclamation from Isaiah has poignant new meaning as the Apostle Paul quoted it, “Death has been swallowed up in victory!” Life does not come to a hopeless end, but to an endless hope! Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. And because he lives we shall live also, as we trust in him!

The resurrection is why today we have a faith called Christian, a Church, and an undying Hope! Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is alive here and now among us, is why we offer the most exalted worship of any day of the year, dress in new clothes, decorate the church with glorious spring flowers, for nature itself bursts forth with new life. After bitter winter freezes that nearly killed so many of our shrubs and trees, life is again surging through trunks and branches of many of them. Green leaves are popping out! What seemed to have died- lives!

Each of the four gospels tells the story of Jesus’ resurrection from a different angle. But in all of them the women are the first to arrive at the tomb. In Matthew the two Marys encounter the radiant angel, meet the Risen Lord, fall at his feet in worship, and then announce the resurrection. (Just in case you are wondering about women preachers- what is the chief task of a preacher but to proclaim the resurrection! And who are the first to do that? The women.) In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and another Mary arrive together at the tomb, expecting to solemnly, tenderly, lovingly make final burial anointing for the body of their friend, as he had so quickly been brought into the borrowed tomb before the coming of the Jewish Sabbath on Friday at sundown. What they discover is something altogether different.

II

Matthew’s account is the most dramatic as he describes what happens in terms of a great earthquake. The powerful, earth shattering transformative force brought about by the power of God, is mediated by a mighty angel of the Lord, his appearance like lightening, his clothing white as snow.

An earthquake is the means through which the new reality of Jesus’ resurrection occurs. The earthquake is like a cataclysmic drumroll, an atomic explosion if you will, announcing this most startling event. It is the ending of one age and the beginning of another.

There is an Easter Sunrise Service celebrated each year on the brow of the Grand Canyon. A giant boulder is heaved over the rim, as it goes crashing down the side of the Grand Canyon into the Colorado River far below, (Cort 30) after which a 2000 voice choir bursts into singing the Hallelujah Chorus. Too dramatic? Not if, despite all appearances, we live in a new age, a new creation, an Easter world.ⁱ

Matthew actually tells us of two earthquakes, first an earthquake as Jesus dies, and now an earthquake as he rises. On Friday as Jesus cried with a loud voice and breathed his last, a moment of horror- the earth shook, the rocks split, the heavy curtain in the temple separating God in the holy of holies from the people was torn in two, torn from top to bottom, an act from God from heaven, not the work of humans. Even more dramatic, as Matthew tells it, the tombs were opened and the dead saints who had suffered and died before Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross were raised. Easter started early in Matthew's account. An outsider, a Roman soldier, seeing Jesus die testifies with advance Easter faith, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Everything is being reversed here. Women see the mighty angel sitting casually there on top of the stone rolled back opening a tomb that is now empty, for the one who was dead is alive, while armed soldiers sent to guard the tomb from any of Jesus' followers coming and stealing the body are petrified like dead men. Sitting there the angel of God reclines comfortably upon the stone and virtually laughs with glee!

Larry Michael received an email from his sister this past week that read – "Jesus is risen! LOL" Larry should this to the staff saying – "I think she meant "Lots of Love" But she may well have meant "Jesus is Risen. Laugh out Loud!" Hippolytus, an important 2nd century Christian theologian, described what had happened saying,

“‘The risen Christ is the leader of the mystic round dance and the church is the bride who dances with him.’ With Easter the laughter of the redeemed, and the dance of the liberated and the creative play of fantasy begins.”ⁱⁱ

The resurrection of Jesus had the power and force of a massive earthquake. Generally, earthquakes bring vast waves of devastation and destruction. Our son Peter in San Francisco has experienced several, thankfully more minor ones, in his years there.

We have all grieved and so many round the world are reaching out to help in Turkey and Syria, where recent earthquakes have destroyed whole cities and killed over 56,000 people. Damaging also the National Presbyterian Church in Aleppo, Syria where we worshipped last October with so many the precious children there. Their building sustained significant damage- thankfully all the congregation were safe.

An award-winning photographer and writer captured heart-breaking photographs of devastated cities and wrote this text in a two-page spread in the New York Times on March 26.

“An earthquake is something physical, a sensation the body can feel, but one so vast and abstract that it surpasses comprehension. I imagine it is what being in the presence of God must feel like, both terrifying and inspiring- thirsting for life in the face of death,

hoping in the face of hopelessness, shouting into a deafening silence, clinging onto existence in the face of the void.”

III

These two earthquake Matthew describes, however, are used to dramatically announce joy, life and love, to show us just how massive and how healing and how lifegiving is Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection for our life.

The Call to Worship that first Easter was not a casual “Good Morning”. It was a seismic shock through history that signaled the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope.ⁱⁱⁱ As C.S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity,

“Christ had defeated death. The door which had always been locked had for the very first time been forced open. This is something quite distinct from mere ghost-survival. The resurrection narratives are not a picture of survival after death; they record how a totally new mode of being has arisen in the universe. Something new as the first coming of organic life. This man, after death does not get divided into “ghost” and “corpse.” A new mode of being has arisen. That is the story.”^{iv}

IV

You see, the resurrection announces not death and destruction but life, and love, joy, and peace, and the end of all fear. For this new mode of being, this Risen Christ, is with us. As the women rush to tell the others they are filled with both fear and joy. After Jesus’ death all his followers were afraid. Their master had been killed. Their hopes had been dashed. All the disciples had fled in the darkness of night as Jesus was arrested in the Garden. Only John stood at the cross on Golgotha, supporting Mary, Jesus’ mother.

After his crucifixion it was left to two secret followers, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea who asked Pilate for Jesus’ body and takes it to his private tomb, assisted by a Pharisee named Nicodemus, carrying a hundred-pound bag over his shoulders of myrrh and aloes burial spice. Nicodemus, who had come to see Jesus secretly at night and who was told that what is necessary to enter this new Kingdom of God Jesus was bringing is experiencing a new spiritual birth from above. All the disciples were cowering in fear on Sunday.

Many things in our broken world can cause us to fear as we live amid wars and fears of larger wars, environmental devastation, deadly diseases, some new strain of Covid virus, and ongoing violence in our communities, with school shootings and chaos in legislative bodies. But if we are alive to the truth the angel declares, we can live beyond all fear no matter what happens. The angel said,

“Do not be afraid; 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. 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.”^v

V

What the resurrection evokes from us is faith, hope and love, a deep abiding trust, that overcomes all our fears, trust that Jesus is alive and will meet us in the Galilee of our lives. As the women are departing to tell the others they encounter Jesus personally, standing there before them. They are so overwhelmed they fall down before him, grasping his feet to feel if he is really there, and worshipping him.

Jesus tells them the same thing as the angel, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, there they will see me.” They do so, and in the next scene with the disciples they are back up in Galilee at the mountain. Throughout Matthew mountains play a big role in igniting faith. Jesus is tempted by the devil and resists on a high mountain. He climbs a mountain in Galilee where he delivers his Sermon on the Mount. He is assured of his destiny on a mountain of transfiguration where Peter, James and John are told by the voice from a cloud “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”^{vi} Now Jesus meets them on the mountain of Galilee. Perhaps the same mountain from which he delivered that opening Sermon.

The mountain is significant, but so too is Galilee. Galilee is where Jesus tells the disciples he will meet them. You see, Galilee represents their everyday lives, the place where they had fished and sat around camp fires, gone to weddings, and learned from him.

My friends, Jesus wants to meet you in your Galilee. Not only in church on Easter Sunday, but in your home and the neighborhood where you live, the office or the hospital or the school where you work, the ball field or dance class where you play. He wants to meet you in all these places.

“Not throned afar, remotely high, Untouched, unmoved by human pains,
But daily, in the midst of life, Our Savior in the God-head reigns.”^{vii}

Yet, even here, after all that has occurred, still the disciples are filled with a mixture of faith and doubt. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” If you are here today and still having lingering doubts I have good news for you. Jesus will meet you where you are. If you will seek him he will show you some sign, some hint, some whisper, that will speak to you and assure you he is alive and life has conquered death, and you have a purpose in living now, and an eternal destiny ahead!

Now the Risen Lord gives them and gives us an immense global task. He claims comprehensive authority- All authority in heaven and on earth, and he charges them to take this message of forgiveness, faith, joy and new life in him throughout the whole world. For even as the earthquake announced the beginning of a new order in the shifting of tectonic plates, so he is telling them that this resurrection life is to radiate throughout the world. All the barriers are down now.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

It seemed like an impossible task for this little band, up against a mighty empire and entrenched religious institution. The task is staggering. But he promises them and he promises us, he will be with us always. “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

VI

Friends what Easter tells us is that life is so much bigger than our brief years on this earth. We live in this passing world only a short time. We see that passing just by looking at the plaques throughout this sanctuary remembering those saints who went ahead of us here and who built and sustained with their time, their sweat and their money this congregation for almost 135 years.

You see, we also live in another world, beyond the boundaries of time and space. Eternal life is promised us in Christ. And it need not begin at our death. We need not be stuck in the Good Friday world! We can live in the resurrection world on the other side of the earthquake Easter right here, right now. We can experience that world in one another and so when our time comes we can face and even welcome with joy our translation into that vast eternal world, accompanied by him who is the resurrection and the life!

“‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”^{viii}

In the town in Spain where Christopher Columbus died in 1506 there is a monument erected in memory of the great explorer. The most interesting part of the monument is a statue of a lion who is wiping out the first Latin word of the motto Spain had adopted for centuries. It read, “Ne Plus Ultra,” which literally reads, “No More Beyond.” You see, before Columbus Spanish explorers thought they had pushed the outer limits and there was nothing more to be discovered beyond. After Columbus and his discoveries, the lion with his paw is ripping off the Latin word, “ne”, “no” so that the motto now reads, “More beyond.”

William Sloan Coffin, was a famed preacher at the Riverside Church in New York City, chaplain at Yale during the Vietnam era, and once a CIA agent, a man born to privilege who heard the call of Christ to ministry, he described his own stepping into faith like this.

“Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Following the advice of AA, I decided to commit as much of myself as I could to as much of God as I believed in. That struck me as an honest way of proceeding. Sunday by Sunday Jesus became more and more real to me. Gradually the dazzling truth dawned on me, Jesus is both a mirror to humanity and a window to divinity.”

Today, dear friends hear and believe this earth quaking news. Christ is alive and life has conquered death. “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” The old order is done with, a new order has begun. Christian faith is not an ideology it is a kinship, a relationship with God and all who love God. Fullness of life is possible. So, on this, my last Easter with you, I tell you what I have always told you, Step through the door! Follow your ABC’s, “**A - Acknowledge Christ! B- Believe Christ! C-Confess Christ, D – Delight in Christ!** Then live in Christ and for Christ and spread the word!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin, Letters To A Young Doubter, p.172

ⁱⁱ Jurgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, p.110

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Long, Matthew, p.322

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, found in Bread and Wine, p. 263

^v Matthew 28:5-7

^{vi} Matthew 17:5

^{vii} The Presbyterian Hymnal, "Christ Is Alive!" p.108

^{viii} 1 Corinthians 15, selected