

Easter Day: Matthew 28:1-10
Piedmont Episcopal Church
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Easter is an earthquake. That's what Matthew tells us in this morning's Gospel lesson. He says that when Easter happened, the whole earth shook. Luke does Easter as a meal on Sunday evening with the risen Christ. John has the resurrected Jesus meeting with Mary Magdalene in the garden. But Matthew? For Matthew, Easter is an earthquake with doors shaken off tombs and dead people walking the streets, the stone rolled away by the ruckus and an impudent angel sitting on it.

Now I've never been through an earthquake. Folks who live in California or Japan or Haiti, know what earthquakes are like. I grew up in Florida. We don't have to deal with earthquakes in Florida. Hurricanes? Sure. But no earthquakes. I don't know how I would respond if all of a sudden the ground started heaving under my feet. I suspect my reaction would probably be something like how the Methodist bishop William Willimon reacted the first time he was in an earthquake. Willimon, who is from Alabama, was invited to preach at a service in Alaska. And during the sermon, he recalls, the earth heaved for a moment that seemed like forever. The little church shook. But the Alaskan Methodists sat there like it was another day at the office. Their only response was the woman who said, "How about that, the light fixtures didn't fall this time." Well, Willimon ended his sermon immediately. He was shaken not just by the earthquake, but even more by how nonchalant the Alaskans were. At lunch after the service, Willimon asked the pastor, "What the heck would it take to get this congregation's attention? I'd hate to have to preach to *them* every Sunday!"

I think if there was an earthquake right now, I'd stop preaching, too, and run for cover. That's the normal human reaction when the very ground we stand on starts moving under our feet: *fear*.

We take for granted that the ground we walk on will always be there. But during an earthquake, even the most basic assumptions can't be counted on. Earthquakes challenge our assumption that the *terra firma* will be stay *firma*, firm, that the earth will remain steady beneath our feet, that the world's current existence is the way it will always be. But when the ground shakes beneath our feet, it rattles the bedrock assumptions upon which we build our lives.

I'm not just talking about the earthquakes that show up on the Richter scale, but also the unexpected shifts in our relationships, those unanticipated events that rock the norms by which we live. Sometimes the events are global—the day the World Trade Center's fell or the markets crashed. Sometimes they are deeply personal—the broken marriage vows, the cancer diagnosis, the ended career, the death of a loved one. When the earth shakes, we naturally cry out, "my God, why have you forsaken me?"

That's where Matthew leaves the women on Friday night. They feel the earth literally shake as they watched Jesus die. They saw Joseph of Arimathea place his battered, bloody body in the tomb carved into solid rock. They hear the stone, the symbol of the finality of death, rolled across the entrance with a heavy, funereal thud. Pilate's guards place the seal of Rome on it and

settle in to make sure the body stays where it belongs. It is the end of Jesus's story. Everyone can return to the world and to their lives. The way they had always been.

But then the unexpected happens! As the new day dawns, another great earthquake occurs. An angel descends - the biblical sign of God's direct intrusion into human history—rolls back the stone, sits down, crosses his legs, dusts off his hands, and with a confident wink asks, "Got any bigger stones around here?"

It was as if the Earth which trembled with horror at the death of Christ, now leaped with joy at the resurrection, at the good news that Jesus is not dead, but is risen. God has shattered the all-too-predictable power of death with the unexpected power of a new life. It was an earthquake on multiple levels.

So you can hardly fault those who experienced it for being afraid. The Roman soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb, whose job it was to strike fear in anyone who would challenge the empire, were themselves overcome with fear and became like dead men. The two women who came to the cemetery that morning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, were frightened too. They came to Jesus' tomb to sit vigil, to give witness to death's victory, when the earth shook violently and before them sat an angel in dazzling white clothes.

Now, we're used to paintings of cuddly cherubs, adorable like little winged children, but in Scripture, when angels appear, they tend to strike in those who see them. It's no different here, for the angel immediately tells the women not to be afraid.

But you gotta know these women were scared out of their wits. I'd be. Most people would be. An earthquake and an angel...that's enough to strike holy fear in anyone. When you have come face to face with a power much greater than our own, we can't help but be afraid. Of course what spooked the women wasn't the earthquake or the angel but the power behind the earthquake, that is, God. They saw the hand of God in these wonders and were understandably alarmed. In God's presence, we realize real quick that we are not the center of our existence, that we are not in control, that we are at the mercy of something much bigger than ourselves. This is why, despite the angel's assurances, the women left the tomb with a mixture of fear and joy. Those who once feared death and the power represented by the soldiers now fear the wondrous truth contained in the angel's announcement, "He is risen!" Christ is resurrected.

We modern types try to "explain" the resurrection. One approach says that Jesus was not dead, but in a deep, drugged coma and then woke up. Another says that the disciples got all worked up in their grief and just fantasized the whole thing. Matthew doesn't try to explain it. He just tells it like it is. Jesus who had been crucified has risen. It wasn't that he came back from the dead. That's resuscitation, not resurrection. Neither is it about the immortality of the soul, some divine spark that endures after the end. That's Plato, not Jesus. Neither is the story of Easter like some pagan myth, explaining the return of spring and the emergence of life after winter hibernation. Easter is not about celebrating spring—the daffodils and redbud blossoms know nothing of Good Friday. Easter is rather about God, the Creator of the Universe, who creates a way when there was no way, a God who makes war on evil and death until they are undone, a God who

vindicates Jesus by raising him from the dead. And just in case it's not clear who is in charge, he is the God who makes the whole world tremble.

We modern people figure we know how earthquakes happen. Unlike those before the age of science who attributed tremors to gods or monsters battling beneath the earth, we "know" that earthquakes are what happens when two tectonic plates rub up against one another. The tension builds as the two plates move past each other until the pressure is so great that the friction can't contain it. And the earth snaps like a spring, sending the ground shimmying and shaking and undulating like a wave. That's all.

Only, geology doesn't sufficiently explain the Easter earthquake. The Easter earthquake is the external manifestation of the mysterious, earth-shaking event we know as the resurrection. Through the earthquake, Matthew signals that Christ's death and resurrection changes things, both in the lives of his immediate disciples as well as to the whole world and, indeed, the whole creation. At the resurrection the tension between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, between death and life, between this age and the age to come finally gave way. During Christ's life, the world we know, the world marked by violence, sin, corruption and death, came up against the world to come, a world where God reigns, a world marked by forgiveness, love and eternal life.

Then, in Christ's resurrection, that fault line slipped and a bit of that new reality broke through the hard crust of this world. A new power was set loose into the world, a power that is not contained or constrained by those who think they are in control. In fact, Easter says to those who were in power, that everything their world is built on is being shaken to its foundations. That they should grab onto to something strong, 'cause the world built on sin and selfishness is about to come crashing down around their ears. Easter is indeed an earthquake, with worlds colliding, a whole new reality, God's reality, crashing into ours.

You wouldn't know it, though, by how most of us celebrate Easter. Who would believe that the world has been rocked to its core by looking at all the chocolate bunnies, pastel outfits, and jelly beans strewn about the holy day? Now I like Peeps and chocolate as much as the next guy. But our Easter seems tame and cutesy in comparison to the resurrection accounts.

It's as if we can't bear the power, the strangeness, and the profundity of the resurrection. We'd much rather hide plastic eggs and eat marshmallow chicks than ponder the frightening goodness of the resurrection. We seem to fancy we can have resurrection and still have the world as it was yesterday. We want to have Easter and still have our world unrocked by resurrection. Yet the message of the Easter earthquake is that everything has changed. There's no going back to the way things were. Christ's resurrection, the appearance of the angel and the earthquake all testify to that. Easter is the ultimate, decisive event in human history.

The resurrection is indeed the decisive event of history, but it is only the beginning, the first day of a whole new world. This is true in that Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary is only the first of several encounters the disciples have with the resurrected Christ. We will be hearing about others over the next several weeks of Easter.

But that Christ's resurrection is only the beginning is true in another respect. As Paul says in one of his letters, Christ is the 'first fruits' of a much larger harvest, the "first born" of the new creation. This is to say, the resurrected Christ is the "sneak preview" of what we will be like when Christ returns and all are resurrected from the dead. In the meantime, we who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection are a part of what God has done in Jesus. We are the "aftershocks" of Easter, if you will. We are to shake up the world a little, keep it on its toes, to remind the world to have a healthy fear of the Lord. We are to show the world that the resurrection is not simply a myth or timeless truth or enduring memory. It is rather an event, a frightening, and awesome, and powerful event. An event that shook the foundations of the world, and its impact continues to be felt still today, in the lives of those who have met the resurrected Christ and all who have met him through us.

On this day Jesus danced forth from death into life, defeating the powers of evil and death, showing the incredible power of God. On this day Jesus came back to his despondent disciples and surprised them with your presence. Let us pray that God would grant us sufficient imagination to comprehend the miracle of this day, that we would be shook in our complacency, in our too easy accommodation with the powers of death. May God strengthen us as we stand before his awesome presence. And give us such an awareness of your mercy and goodness that we will not become as dead men, paralyzed by fear, but empowered to go out boldly together, proclaiming the resurrection of Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.