

THREATENED BY RESURRECTION
MATTHEW 28:1-10; EASTER, MARCH 31, 2002
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There are many good reasons for you and me to be here today. Easter is the quintessential day of the Christian year. There is the music, of course; nor should the opportunity to wear new Easter clothes be left off the list – something I always looked forward to as a child. And perhaps for some of us here today certain family members who do not expect you to be here otherwise, do appreciate your being in church this morning.

But there are some very good reasons not to be here, as well. This day which is fundamentally about resurrection brings us face to face with something that is impossible to explain – a predicament educated people find hard to live with. Many, therefore, perhaps some even among us regard Easter as a pious legend or embarrassing fraud; a puzzle choral anthems and spring flowers after long winter months cannot disguise or solve.

Yet, beyond these reasons to be here and reasons not to be here there is one reason better than any of them for us to stay put, which is also the same reason that could be cited for us to walk out the door right now: the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth threatens your life...and mine too.

I do not mean to throw sand in your spiritual gears this morning or suggest that anyone get up and leave – even if you are so inclined. We are grateful you are here today for whatever reason brings you.

But I do mean to put my finger, even clumsily, on the tension that underlies this annual festival in the church. A subterranean stress if you will in our hearts.

These theological tectonics, these tremors of the soul, are what Matthew must have been feeling reporting Jesus' Resurrection. So altered is his post-Easter perspective that he tells us not of one but two earthquakes that shook the Holy City when Jesus was raised.

Earthquakes are serious business. Of all the natural disasters: floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and blizzards an earthquake would be last on my list to suffer through. Yet, like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and blizzards, earthquakes serve an important function – they resolve and reconcile planetary systems under stress. The power of an earthquake is generated by misalignments within the earth that must be returned to right order. In the process, surface structures are damaged. But the deep structure and integrity of the earth is restored.

An earthquake uncovers the illusion that we are standing on solid ground. It reveals the reality of hidden strains and faults. We have family members living up and down the coast of California. Whenever we talk over the telephone they amuse themselves asking about the snow in Buffalo. Recently, I have been tempted to ask them if they have checked the level of precariousness at which the San Andreas fault beneath them has been teetering lately.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of an earthquake is you never know when one is coming. Radar and weather systems predict all other natural disasters, but nobody can predict an earthquake.

The biblical writers describing the end of history made good use of earthquakes to convey the sudden and dramatic way in which God will reveal to humanity that it has been standing on less than solid ground. A day of justice and judgement that will bring everything back into alignment.

The message this morning, from Matthew, is that Easter is an earthquake that shook the whole world. Easter is an event that redefines our reality, realigns the forces of creation, brings integrity to the deep structure of human existence.

If the ability to anticipate an earthquake depends on our awareness of the stress and fault lines there can be little question that things need realigning ...that we are not on solid ground. We make our peace with death then go on as if everything is fine. How else to explain the ease with which we go to war – when the weapons of our time have the potential to destroy the earth. How else to explain why we are drawn to entertainment that depicts violence and killing? How else to comprehend why we embrace the notion of “acceptable levels of death” in our increasingly toxic environment?ⁱ

Things need realigning. A recent study on teenage suicide shows the trend over the last 40 years has tripled for boys and doubled for girls. Speculation has to do with the prevalence of divorce, the breakdown of the nuclear family resulting in deep emotional wounds, low self-esteem, proclivity to depression and anxiety disorders. Not to mention the incontrovertible role of drugs and alcohol.

To be sure, suicide remains in many respects a mystery – as mysterious as individuals are to one another and to themselves.

Yet today’s young people have their own struggles to face – hence the startling rise in suicide. Fewer adults involved in their lives; bestowal of an empty ‘autonomy’ at an early age; a college environment that offers a host of choices but abstains from nurturing moral character and development; a consumer culture that defines success in terms of possessions and sexual marketability.ⁱⁱ Things need realigning.

Yet, we have made our peace with death and desire to go on as if everything were fine. The experience of a colleague who suffers depression offers insight for all of us. He says part of him wants to stay depressed. “In my depression,” he says, “no one expects much of me, and neither do I. I am not saying depression is some sort of vacation, but its very hideousness makes it all the more startling that part of me wants to remain depressed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You see, most of us come to Easter morning with the notion that death is the great threat. But, truth be told, death in its various forms rather than threatening is comforting. Resurrection and new life are demanding and threatening.

So we opt for death. A colleague preaching in Alaska says during his sermon, the earth heaved a moment that seemed forever. The little church shook. 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 even fall this time.” My colleague ended the sermon instantly, shaken by the earthquake and the nonchalance of the people. Later, he asked the pastor, “what would it take to get this congregation’s attention? I’d hate to have to preach to them every Sunday.”^{iv}

I'm not sure those Alaskan Methodists are that different from say, for example, New York Presbyterians. We like to believe that you can have resurrection and still have the world as it was yesterday. Not unlike San Franciscans struggling mightily to shore up old structures, ingeniously upgrading pre-earthquake technology with the latest engineering improvements.

We want to have Easter and still have our world un-rocked by resurrection. We have been schooled not to confuse every rattling of teacups with a real earthquake. We are cautious and reserved when asked to foresee what it all might mean – so amazingly adjusted are we to the same old world, the same old death. We are Lazarus from William Butler Yates play, "Calvary." Lazarus who comes to ridicule and condemn Jesus on his way to crucifixion.

"Surely, you will not mock me," Christ says to Lazarus. "For four whole days," Lazarus retorts, "I had been dead and was lying still in a comfortable mountain cavern when you came climbing there with a great crowd and dragged me to the light... as boys drag a rabbit when they dig its hole away.... Now you blind with light the solitude that death has made; you disturb that corner where I thought I was safe forever.""^v

The terrifying and good news today is that we are threatened with resurrection. There is no safe corner. There is no safe death. On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all God could to the world. And the earth shook.

It is no coincidence that fear marks the disciples' response to Jesus' resurrection in each of the Gospels. I wonder, in fact, if our regard for Easter as a pious legend or embarrassing fraud has less to do with our reluctance to embrace something that cannot be explained and more to do with our reluctance to be dragged into the light, our unwillingness to have our world realigned.

Better to stand with indignant Lazarus, despairing youth or the distinguished preacher of the last generation who said, "God's mercies are new every morning. At my age the promise of newness every morning is a mixed blessing. I am at the point when I do not want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers beneath my bed. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast as usual. At my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning.""^{vi}

You see resurrection tests our willingness to be brought into a larger life than the one we now know. The truth of Easter is on the faces of those befuddled disciples. Not one of them expected or wanted Easter. Death, defeat while regrettable were eminently understandable. Death and defeat fit the confines of their world.

But that little world was realigned on Easter Day. God took the cross – an instrument of death and ushered in life. And the world shook. God took the betrayal of Jesus' friends and extended forgiveness. And the world shook. God took a beleaguered community of scattered followers and empowered them to become the church to lead and serve. And the world shook.

You cannot explain resurrection but you can witness it. You cannot resist realignment but you can find your balance in God's new order.

Matthew says the women went to the cemetery to finish the story of Jesus' life.
One more sad story in the long march of death.

One more disappointing episode of death's dark victory.

And then the earth heaved, an angel appeared, the stone rolled away, and the Roman legionnaires shook. The angel sat on the stone in defiance of death – like a victorious David sitting on the chest of a prone Goliath that stone of a man whom God rolled away to free the people of Israel – and the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus? He is not here.”

Then the angel turned to the soldiers and said, “Be afraid. Everything your world is built upon has begun to collapse.”^{vii}

If the old house of despair or anger or grief in which you live is starting to rattle today, if the familiar furniture of resignation you call home is beginning to shift a little this morning;

then it might just be time, according to my California relatives, to get yourself into an open doorway. It could be that God is realigning things beneath the ground on which you stand. It could be that the tremors of your soul portend the restoration of right order in the deep structure of your heart. It could be that now is the time in your life to find a threshold to stand in and walk through when dilapidated death comes crashing down.

I do not presume to predict earthquakes. But I do know that they happen in the life of faith when deep resignation and death crumble beneath the force of resurrection and new life.

I know, it means you will have to find another place to live.

But just think of the possibilities of life on solid ground in a new home! Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Parker J. Palmer, The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring (San Francisco: Harper and Row) 142.

ⁱⁱ “Dying Young,” The Christian Century, March 13-20, 2002, page 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Palmer, 141.

^{iv} William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, March 31, 2002, page 57.

^v William Butler Yates, “Calvary,” text unknown, taken from xerox copy of the play.

^{vi} Thomas Long, Journal for Preachers, Easter 2001, quote taken from John M. Buchanan sermon, “Surprised by God,” April 15, 2001.

^{vii} Willimon, 58.