

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Resurrection: Sometimes the Earth Shakes and Sometimes It Doesn’t”
Matthew 27: 45-28: 10
Resurrection of the Lord
April 16, 2017

Each of the New Testament gospel writers puts his own unique spin on the story of Jesus’s resurrection. Mark who wrote the earliest of the four resurrection narratives leaves the reader dangling in mid-air. He gives readers cause to wonder if perhaps somebody’s dog had come along and chewed off the last page of the story (like my dog Leonard chewed off the edges of my Bible...Leonard interprets Scripture literally. He took Psalm 38 to heart, “Taste and see that the Lord is good!”). Luke was the J.K. Rowling or the Patricia Cornwell of the first century. At the end of his gospel, he is already anticipating his sequel to the resurrection story found in Acts. John is both theologian and poet; it is he alone among the gospel writers who recounts a meeting in which Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the cemetery gardener.

Compared to the other gospel writers, Matthew—whose account we are reading today—is Cecil B. DeMille. Matthew’s account is dramatic. It is loud!

We begin today’s reading with the earsplitting noise of Jesus’s crucifixion.

Of the four gospel writers, Matthew is the only one to mention anything about earthquakes.

Matthew’s gospel recounts not one earthquake, but three.

The first earthquake rattled the ground when Jesus was crucified. The curtain that hung in front of the Temple’s Holy of Holies was ripped in half and the Roman centurion screamed out his terror and the tombs spit out a first-century zombie apocalypse. Matthew wants readers to know that the tectonic plates of the religious establishment and the mighty Roman Empire and indeed the entire cosmos had shifted and nothing would ever be the same again.

The second earthquake occurred as the two women arrived at the tomb. When they arrive, the stone is still there. Then an angel—an angel who really knows how to make an entrance—soars down from heaven like a fighter jet, gives the stone a push, and sits on it with his angelic arms folded in front of him.

The third earthquake is the earthquake which takes place inside the guards who had been instructed “Keep the tomb as secure as you can” and leaves them looking like dead men. The verb that is translated “shook” is from the same root as the word *seismos* – “earthquake.”

From the vantage point of reading Matthew’s account two millennia after he put quill to parchment and wrote his passion and resurrection narrative, we can’t possibly know all the reasons that Matthew told the story the way that he did.

But I have a hunch that he told the story the way that he did because his readers in the first century were a great deal like his readers...like us...in the 21st century. They, like we, devoted a great deal of thought, a great deal of energy, toward feeling safe....protecting what we have, insuring ourselves against loss and risk, keeping things “normal,” stable, healthy, calm. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you can,” Pilate had told the religious leaders as the ads for Allstate and Farmers’ and Nationwide and USAA tell us in our own day. And so the religious leaders did. They sealed the stone tight and set a guard of soldiers to keep watch. The extracanonical Gospel of Peter goes into great detail telling how the soldiers sealed the stone with seven seals before pitching a tent in front of the tomb and settling in to prevent any tampering or deception.

Here’s the picture: a dead body, laid in a tomb carved out of rock, with a huge stone covering the entrance to the tomb, the stone sealed up tight, and outside a squad of homeland security agents.(1) Sounds like a pretty good insurance policy to against any more earthquakes to me!

I mention all this because I also have a hunch that there are some of us who are here today (or listening on the radio or joining us via live streaming) who not long ago...maybe it was 10 years ago, or maybe it was 5 years ago, or maybe it was last Easter, or maybe it was last week...and you thought that you had taken every precaution against earthquakes shaking the foundations of your life.

But then it happened...

The earthquake that was the death of your spouse, your parent, your child.

The earthquake that was the cancer diagnosis.

The earthquake that was your divorce, the loss of your job, your friend’s rejection.

The earthquake that was racial violence in the streets of Charlotte.

The earthquake that is the political division that has torn the fabric of your family, your friendships, perhaps even your experience of church, clean in two.

Matthew is a loud, dramatic truth-teller for those times in our lives when circumstances jerk us up and shake our wellbeing like a rag doll and turn us every which way and throw us to the ground feeling half dead.

And the truthful good news that Matthew means for his readers, for us, to hear is that when death-dealing earthquakes rattle our lives, we can trust that there will be an antiphonal earthquake of resurrection, an earthquake of resurrection whose epicenter is the expansive love of God which will never let us go, the deep love of God which is always on the side of those who suffer, the enduring love of God which enables us and our brothers and sisters in every age to trust that death in any and all of its many forms does not have the last word.

Now neither Matthew nor I can offer any easy assurances today. Your resurrection from the death that you may be experiencing right now may come sooner than you expect, but it may also come later than you wish and hope for. Another truth of the stories of Jesus’s resurrection, no matter which of the gospel writers is telling the story, is that it is okay, it is normal, it is the human condition to feel afraid before, during, and after the earthquake.

But the promise of Jesus’s resurrection is that the earthquake is not the whole story.

There is life. There is life beyond the earthquake. There is life beyond the earthquake to be lived in Galilee.

Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,[b] 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."

In Matthew's account of Jesus's resurrection, Galilee is more than a mere dot on a map found at the back of your Bible. Galilee is the place where Jesus had initially entered the lives of his followers. Galilee is the place of going to school and to work, of changing diapers and ferrying carpools, of studying for exams and grading papers, of tutoring children at our partner Blythe Elementary School and laying shingles on the roof of a Habitat for Humanity House and serving lunch to guests at the Mooresville Soup Kitchen, of phoning your Senator to remind him that you elected him to serve the needs of the poor and marginalized and signing up to be an organ donor when you go to the DMV to renew your license, of writing checks to put in the offering plate and showing up for choir practice and teaching Sunday School, of sitting silently with a friend who is grieving and praying for families wounded and scarred by violence in Syria.

Galilee is the place where the earth seldom shakes. Galilee is found in the quieter places where we spend most of our lives. And Galilee, my dear brothers and sisters, is where Jesus has promised us that we will find him alive if we only open our eyes to see him amid our fear and amid our joy. He is out there ahead of us. He is out there ahead of us and he is already at work and he invites us to join him so that we will be as truly alive as he is.

It is true, sometimes the earth shakes and sometimes it doesn't, but in all times and in all places, there is life to be lived beyond the earthquake; there is life beyond death; there is life to be lived in Galilee.

1. Charles B. Cousar, "Make It As Secure As You Know How," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003, 17.