

All shaken up

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After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "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.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." - Matthew 28:1-10

Matthew's gospel is the only one from which we learn that the resurrection of Jesus was accompanied by an earthquake. It's only one of several features that make Matthew's resurrection account the most dramatic among the four gospels.

Only Matthew tells us of an angel who '*descended from heaven*' and '*whose appearance was like lightning.*' Only Matthew tells us of Roman soldiers guarding the tomb and who, because they were terrified, '*became like dead men*'. And only Matthew tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is accompanied by an earthquake.

An earthquake is a strong image, and, contemplating Matthew's account, I believed it might provide a compelling focal point for an Easter message. But further reflection led to reservations; an earthquake may be a strong image but it's not often a strong *positive* image. Some of us may be fascinated by earthquakes. Few if any of us want to be *in* one. So I did what the savvy preacher does these days - a Google search: "W-h-a-t i-s g-o-o-d a-b-o-u-t a-n e-a-r-t-h-q-u-a-k-e?" The results were not promising.

The first Google result began with a summary, titled, "Earthquakes - Good and Bad". First: *The Bad - Earthquakes cause significant injury, destruction of property, and loss of life.* Then: *The Good - Energy released during earthquakes provides information about Earth's interior.*" An entry at ask.com offers this contradiction': "*Earthquakes are good because if this energy were not released ... it would cause a lot of damage.*" And WikiAnswers says: "*If the earthquake takes place in your neighborhood, there's nothing good about it.*"

You would think by now that I would choose a different main image for an Easter sermon! But as the old saying goes: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Only in this instance, I'm asking you to rush with me to the place where an angel has already trodden - an angel that has come from God, an angel that has rolled away a tombstone and who announces resurrection ... accompanied by an earthquake.

So, how can the earthquake positively shape our understanding or experience of resurrection? Well, as a starting point, earthquakes are vivid and highly memorable. Psychologists have learned that people who have been in a major earthquake can remember the event in remarkable detail years later. And you or I may know people whose conversion to a life of faith, or whose life-changing turning point, took place when they were shaken by a great upheaval that they can still recall in vivid detail. Perhaps Matthew notes the earthquake in conjunction with Christ's resurrection partly because he does not want his readers, including you and me, to simply yawn it off. *This is a 'pay attention' moment!*

A 'great earthquake' such as Matthew describes is memorable in large part because it is an expression of great power, and in particular the divine power with which the Bible is concerned from beginning to end. This power of God demonstrated in Matthew's resurrection account directly confronts, addresses and puts in perspective the lesser and often, narcissistic, cruel or otherwise misguided powers of this world.

In case you missed them, the powers of this world are uniquely and prominently featured in Matthew's resurrection account. They are the Roman soldiers who are guarding the tomb. They're well trained and well-armed. They are backed by the authority of the Empire. And they were fully confident that they were in complete control of the situation ... up until the earthquake. Those soldiers and their example cause me to wonder what tomb or tombs I may imagine that I have been assigned to guard - not literal tombs but tombs of memory or grief or decades-old expectations. In many cases neither God nor I nor others are any longer being served by whatever I've buried and continue to guard. But I'm still keeping vigil with heavy weaponry and, with alternating smug confidence and terror, I believe that I can maintain control in my own empire and keep what's buried buried. Until there's a great earthquake. What about you, and whatever you've been guarding?

I'm grateful that the resurrection account in Matthew shows us not only terrified soldiers but also the women who had come to the tomb. Like the soldiers, the women are frightened. But whereas the soldiers 'shook and became like dead men' the women, upon hearing the angel's announcement, '*left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.*' The earthquake and the angel's greeting have reversed their sorrowful expectations, broken open their tomb of grief and begun to allow in light and wonder. Soon, Jesus himself appears to them, and what are his first words to them? "Do not be afraid."

Few if any of us may want to experience a great earthquake, but Matthew may have included the earthquake in his resurrection story to remind us that a power so much greater than ourselves was at work in Christ ... and is waiting to be at work in us. Matthew may have also known, from his own life experiences and observations, that sometimes our old expectations or our ego fortifications or defenses need to be shaken, sometimes the tombstone we've been guarding needs be rolled aside, to prepare us for something new, that something we Christians often recognize as God's resurrection life in Christ.

Earlier I mentioned my futile efforts, by way of a Google search, to learn anything positive about earthquakes. I did, however, come across one compelling account of an earthquake by the American naturalist John Muir. Describing one of his first explorations of Yosemite, in California, Muir wrote: "I was awakened by a tremendous earthquake ... the strange thrilling motion could not be mistaken, and I ran out of my cabin, both glad and frightened ... feeling sure I was going to learn something."

That story may feel particularly timely for many of us now because of the image of Muir running out of his cabin - something that we ourselves are mostly unable to do at this time. For some of us, our own cabins may in fact be starting to feel like tombs.

But let us imagine and hope and pray for the day, soon, when we will once again go forth freely, curiously, joyfully. What would it be like for us to go out as Muir wrote of himself after the earthquake - not only both glad and frightened but also feeling sure we are going to learn something? What if, even in our cabins now, Christ is seeking to greet us and to say, "Do not be afraid." What if in the midst of all of it we better saw and felt and understood the resurrection that God not only shows us in Christ but promises and intends for each of us?

Amen.