

A Easter 1 4.9.23

Matthew 28:1-11; Acts 10:34-43

Focus Statement: Reoriented to love.

Let me preface this by saying that while I have been in several earthquakes, I have never been in a major earthquake. My earthquake experience is limited to the sort of tremor that takes out glassware and off-centers picture frames, not the sort that takes out buildings. But, that being said, I can tell you that an earthquake, any earthquake, is a super disorienting experience. The ground is not supposed to move on its own, it's the ground. Terra firma, the literal foundation on which we stand. It is, by definition, supposed to be stable. And when it's not, when it shifts and shakes and buckles, it's weird. The largest earthquake I've been in was when I was home visiting my parents over Christmas break in college. When the ground started moving, twenty years of California public education earthquake drills kicked in and I went to "drop, cover, and hold" as I had been taught under the dining room table. Only to be reminded that my parents' dining room table is glass and thus not a good refuge. So I ended up wandering around looking for another table while my mother, who, I've never let her live this down, her first instinct was to rescue the dog, stood in a doorway yelling for me to take cover. "I see you saved the dog," I yelled as I walked back from the kitchen trying to find another table, "why didn't you rescue me." "The dog doesn't know what to do, it's a dog," she quipped back. "You're an adult, get in a doorway." When we had that earthquake in Galesburg a few years ago, I was in the Willard library. Libraries are normally places where we speak in hushed tones, but as soon as the ground started moving, there wasn't yelling, but everyone reverted to a normal speaking voice and a weird communal feeling took over as we all questioned each other, was that an earthquake?

The ground is not supposed to move. And when it does, when the foundations we've built our lives upon, shift under our feet, even if no damage is done, or even if the shifting results in a positive change, the effect is disorienting. The earthquake in our Gospel reading for this morning, which we're going to talk about in a second here, I promise, was a literal "the ground is moving" earthquake. But there are a lot of metaphorical earthquakes that take place in our lives that can upend the foundations of our experience. Grief, loss of a job, a frightening diagnosis, are earthquake experiences. But so too is the arrival of a child or grandchild, retirement, the announcement of remission of a serious illness. The way you moved through the world, identified, saw yourself, was one way. Now you have to relate, interact, move through the world in a totally different way. Nothing is as it was before the foundations around you shook.

And this is jumping ahead in the text a bit, but it struck me that the women responded to seeing Jesus with "fear and great joy." Because that combination of emotions is more often the result of earth-shaking life experiences than we expect. Excitement, of a new job or child or retirement, can come with a side of fear, who will I be with this change. And grief, of the loss of a loved one, or a job, or a serious diagnosis, can come with some relief. That the loved one is no longer suffering, that someone finally told you what was wrong. This mismatch of emotions is itself a complicated feeling. You might ask, am I not happy enough with this amazing event? Or, am I not sufficiently sad with this loss? The women's response assures us that it is possible, normal even, to be at the same event, both happy and sad, excited and terrified. Fear and great joy are both natural responses to events both good and bad. But anyway, let's jump back to the earthquake.

Because before the ground shook in a literal earthquake, it was this sort of metaphorical earthquake that the women had experienced that brought them to the tomb in the early light as the first day of the week was dawning. In Matthew's Gospel, the women didn't go with spices to prepare the body of Jesus, like they are described as doing in some of the others accounts. In Matthew's Gospel they came just to see the tomb itself. Just to stare at the stone rolled across the entrance of the tomb that contained the body of the man they had called teacher, the man they thought might have been the Messiah. The man who, as Peter recounted in our Acts reading, they had been "witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem... [as] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." That is, until the earthquake that shattered their hopes when, "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." They went that morning to be reminded and assured that the earthquake was real, that everything they thought they'd built their hopes on had vanished and nothing would ever be the same again.

That is what they went to see. But then their metaphorical earthquake was shattered by a literal earthquake. The stone was rolled away, the guards became "like dead men," and an angel of the Lord declared, "I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised... Come and see... [then] go and tell." And for the second time in three days, the women found their life reordered, the restructuring of all they had known to be true. For Jesus who they thought was dead was alive again, and had gone on to Galilee, where they would see him.

And it's easy, and maybe tempting, to leave Easter there. As a miraculous event from the past that we celebrate every year with trumpets and lilies and shouts of Alleluia. Jesus appeared, and he showed himself to the women and they went and told the disciples, and isn't that a neat story. It is a great and powerful story, but what does it have to do with shaking the foundations of our own lives? How are we changed, forever restructured, by the events of that first Easter morning? For that, we need Peter.

Many of you know, I love Peter as a character in scripture because Peter was just so human. There's that verse in Revelation about the church in Laodicea being "lukewarm, neither hot nor cold," that was not a problem Peter had. Peter was "you are the Messiah" and "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" in the same breath. He was "You will never wash my feet" and "Lord, not my feet but also my hands and my head." He was, "Though all may become deserters... I will never desert you" and "I do not know the man." Peter's life was a series of earthquakes, many, to be fair, of his own making, as he made bold declarations and then had them crumble at his feet. When we find Peter in Acts, some time had passed and Peter had been able to reflect on the great earthquake of Christ's death and resurrection and the incredible life-changing tremors that event was still having in his life and the lives of those around him.

To set the stage on this Acts passage, Peter had been sent by an angel to Joppa to meet a man named Cornelius who wished to become a follower of God. Which is great, except for the problem that Cornelius was a Gentile, and good God-fearing Jews did not associate with Gentiles. Peter hemmed and hawed about what to do with this angel's request, until a voice

from heaven came to him, along with a large sheet of all sorts of unclean foods and the declaration to “Get up and eat,” for “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And yet again Peter felt the foundations on which he’d built his life shake, as God expanded his understanding of who was included in God’s kingdom, and Peter went on to deliver to Cornelius and all of his household the sermon, part of which we heard today, about how Peter “truly understood that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Dear people of God, Peter’s Acts experience is an example to us that the resurrection of Jesus, the reorientation of the foundation of our lives, is not a thing that happened once two thousand years ago, or once at our baptism, or once when we came to know Jesus. The reorientation of the foundations of our lives that happened that first Easter morning is an event that is still happening today. The earth under our feet is still shaking, we are still learning new and more expansive ways to love one another, to see the risen Christ in each other, and to recognize who is included in God’s family. And we, dear people of God, are witnesses to these things. I love that Peter used “we” as he spoke to Cornelius, because it shows that Cornelius too had become a witness, was now called just as Peter was, to testify to God’s presence in his life and how that presence had changed him.

Friday night at the Good Friday service, we sang a hymn with the line “Every person lost and broken bears the body of our Lord.” And I sat there in the darkened sanctuary with a large wooden cross on the floor and thought, this is the earthquake that is happening each and every day of our lives, reorienting us to love. Because we know God is for everyone, we

know that. But knowing (points to head) and knowing (points to heart) are different things. And again and again throughout history, we see God reorienting us, moving us, expanding us. Every person includes all races, classes, and cultures. Every person includes people across the gender spectrum. Every person includes all ages and abilities. Every person includes every legal status and no legal status. On that day in Joppa, Peter learned that every person included the gentiles. And we're still learning, and relearning, this truth. Just in, not even my lifetime, but my professional lifetime as a leader in this denomination, we've seen dramatic shifts as God continually cracks us open and forces us out.

And, and here's the big 'and,' the 'and' that's maybe even harder to trust than the idea that God is for all people. And every person lost and broken includes you. The same God who is constantly pushing us outward to see strangers as neighbors is just as earthshakingly drawing us inward to know that the God who is for the neighbor is also for you. You too are a person made in God's image. You too are a person for whom Christ died and rose again. You, dear person of God, are witness to all that Christ has done not just for the world, but also for you, to you, in you.

Dear people of God, this Easter morning, season, year, life, here is the promise. In the miracle of the resurrection, God has not only reoriented the world but is continually reorienting each and every one of us to love each other and ourselves. For each and every one of us is a person for whom Christ rose on Easter and is still rising, drawing us ever further into new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.