



“And the Earth Shook”

Matthew 28:1-10; Acts 13:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4

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Easter Sunday

They were the last at the cross and first at the tomb. The faithful women from Galilee followed Jesus from the beginning and supported him with their means. They accompanied him on the fateful trip to Jerusalem, and when the men fled into the night, the women followed Jesus to the cross. There they watched him die and their whole world tumbled in.

Early on Easter morning several of the women—Matthew names Mary Magdalene and another Mary—made their way through the pre-dawn darkness to Jesus’ tomb. In the custom of the day, they brought aromatic spices to fold into the linen cloth that wrapped Jesus’ body.

All the gospel accounts agree. The disciples, men and women, were shrouded in dark despair that morning. Their hearts were shattered, their hopes were gone, and their lives broken in two. He’d promised them God was creating a new world, a world in which God’s shalom would cover the entire earth. Shalom, everything that is good and godly: universal prosperity, justice for all, peace on earth, health and safety.

They’d experienced a taste of God’s shalom in Jesus’ ministry. He’d healed their wounds, made them whole, and gave them life with a meaning they’d only imagined. They heard his healing words, witnessed his healing touch, and wondered at his spiritual power. In him they’d received a taste of eternity here and now.

All of it was destroyed in one terrible day. The dream was dead. He was dead. The world fell back into the ordinary: endless days of work, the brutal heel of Roman oppression that ground them down day after day, the sad reality of perverted justice and official corruption—and the personal burdens that were part of each of their lives. Back to a Good Friday world.

Well, you know the story. When the women reached the tomb, they received the shock of their lives. Matthew says the earth shook. Whether that earthquake was literal or is meant to be a metaphor, it is most certainly true. The earth shook and them with it. Nothing would ever be the same.

The first shock was an empty tomb which doubled their despair. He was gone. Then came shock number two: an angelic announcement, “He is risen. Go and tell the men.”

Well, they didn’t know what to make of that but they set off running and ran into Jesus on the way. “Greetings!” he said. How is that for understatement? Then he added a necessary

word, “Don’t be afraid.” Surprised by joy they fell at his feet, and held onto him for dear life. And the earth shook.

Maybe it’s because they were last at the cross and first at the tomb that he appeared to the women first. One thing is certain, some of the women from Galilee were the first witness to the resurrection. In a real sense that makes them the first apostles, since the office of apostle requires being a witness of the resurrection.

For sure, Easter is part of a theme in the biblical narrative. God comes in unexpected ways and to unlikely people. Jesus didn’t appear to Pilate, King Herod, or the High Priest to show them who was really in charge. He appeared first to a few women, powerless in their world, but chosen to be first witnesses of the resurrection—and to begin a moral/spiritual revolution that shook the world and continues to this day.

No wonder Matthew reports that the earth shook. It did!

None of the disciples, men or women, expected Easter morning. Each time Jesus appeared the disciples were stunned and frightened. In fact the men refused to believe the women. “Silly women’s talk,” they said. Even weeks later when all of them had seen him, some more than once, Matthew says, “Some doubted.”

But when it began to dawn on them what Easter meant, their world rocked on its moral foundations. For one thing, they realized that for once, evil didn’t carry the day. On Good Friday, the world did all it could to Jesus. On Easter, God did all God can do for the world. God had the last word.

Nothing’s been the same since. God’s shalom, goodness in its fullness, did come but not like anyone expected. The old Imperial system didn’t disappear in a political or military coup d’état. Instead, ordinary people like Mary, Joanna, Peter, and John experienced the resurrection. As St. Paul puts it in the Epistle Lesson, they were “raised with Christ.” The power of the resurrection which contains God’s shalom began to spill out of the disciples onto the pages of history and into the lives of the faithful. Enemies were forgiven, neighbors were loved, justice triumphed, and peace was established. Lives and cultures were transformed. And the earth shook.

Take Peter, for example. It took Peter a while to grasp the unexpected consequences of Easter. Peter, like most of the disciples, had a narrow and nationalistic understanding of Jesus’ moral revolution. Doggedly obedient to Scripture as he understood it, he shunned foreigners and kept a strict kosher kitchen. But God had larger ideas.

The lesson in Acts 13 tells about Peter’s second conversion. A Roman Centurion heard about the Christian movement and sent to Peter to find out more. Peter had no intention of sharing good news with this official of the oppressor of Israel, a mortal enemy. He certainly would never break bread with such a dog.

Well it took a vision from God change Peter’s mind—and his mind got quite changed. When he began to speak to Cornelius and his household, he said,

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him...Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

And the world shook.

Consider a more modern illustration of an Easter earthquake. In April 1943, the allies began the bombing of Hamburg, Germany. Hamburg was reduced to ashes and rubble. In just five days, 40,000 people were killed by bombs and fire.

Many of the anti-aircraft guns of Hamburg were manned by high school students pressed into service because most of the able-bodied men were off fighting the war. One of those boys was Jurgen Moltmann. Moltmann's battery received a direct hit. The boy standing next to Moltmann was ripped to shreds. Moltmann was unharmed. Raised in a secular home with few, if any, thoughts of God, he asked for the first time in his life, "God, where are you?"

Soon after, Moltmann was drafted into the army, and in his first battle was taken prisoner. He was shipped to a POW camp in Scotland. There, he said, he "wrestled with the dark side of God, the hidden face of God, God's 'No.'" His whole world tumbled in. The poems of Goethe and the philosophy of Nietzsche which had inspired his youth now meant nothing. He descended into dark despair. He writes, "I concealed a stricken heart behind an armor of untouchability."

Two things happened in those dark days that changed Moltmann's life. For one thing, an unnamed chaplain gave him a Bible, his first. He began to read and was drawn to the Psalms of Lament, which reflected his torment. Psalm 39 captured him,

I was silent and still;
My distress grew worse
My heart became hot within me.
Remove your stroke from me, O God,
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

Then he discovered Jesus' terrible cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Suddenly, he writes, "I knew there is one who understands me." Moltmann's world began to shake.

Second, he says, he was stunned by the Scots who invited the prisoners into their homes and offered them hospitality without guilt or condemnation, forgiveness without confession. His world shook even more.

"Through Christ," he says, "I began to trust God, the God of Jesus Christ. Christ understood me and sought me out as a wounded brother. Without Christ I would have become an atheist."

In 1948, Moltmann was repatriated, and in time became the most influential theologian of the late 20th century. His theology is a theology of hope discovered in his own despair and in the power of the resurrection. In prison, he writes, I learned that "a new beginning is hidden in every end." This new beginning will find you, if you are expecting it. Good Friday is answered on Easter Sunday.

And the earth shook.

We live in difficult days. There is little doubt that we live in a Good Friday world beset with war, distress, oppression, and turmoil, along with the fear we are destroying the planet. A majority of Americans think the future is doubtful at best. I am finding it more difficult to read the newspaper or watch the news these days.

On this Easter morning, all of us are carrying our own burdens, some of them quite heavy. We need Easter hope, the conviction that a new beginning is hidden in every end. Is there hope in a world like this? What does Easter say to a world like this and lives like ours?

Tom Long tells of a seminary president who was invited to participate in a conference of futurists. Professional futurists presented papers to the conference. They outlined fantastic predictions about technological advances, societal change, and the brave new world of the late 20th century. Some of the predictions were downright frightening.

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When it was time for the seminary president to present his paper he said something to the effect that he was a theologian not a futurist and, frankly, had no clear idea what the future would be like. But, he added, "I do know that the future is in the hands of a merciful God."

Several years ago, the seminary president was sorting through his office and found his notes from the conference. As he read, he thought, "I was the only one who was right."

Christ is risen. God has the last word. God's future bends back into time to touch those who believe that new beginnings are hidden in every end. Those new beginnings find us if we expect them. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Amen.

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