

200412 Telling the Resurrection Story in a Difficult Time Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The **guards were so terrified of him** that they **shook with fear** and became like dead men. But the angel said to the **women, “Don’t be afraid**. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ I’ve given the message to you.”

With great **fear and excitement**, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, **“Don’t be afraid**. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there.”

In Matthew’s account the two Marys were present at the tomb during or shortly after this earthquake, apparently an aftershock of the first tremor at the time of Jesus’ death Matthew mentions in 27:51. They see the angel roll the stone away and when they leave to tell the disciples, they meet and talk with Jesus. What a shocking turn of events it was for them, filling them with fear and with excitement.

If you have never experienced an earthquake, I will tell you they can cause great fear. My wife and I were teaching in Japan when the earthquake at Kobe shook the nation in January 1995. I was teaching an interim social psychology class that month at Lakeland College, now University, in Tokyo, and we voted to travel to Kobe to volunteer. The exact number of casualties is unknown, but it was 5500 to 6500 killed, 37,000 to 44,000 injured and about 300,000 displaced. After a one day course on post-traumatic stress counseling from a local university, we took the train each day as far as we could, then walked 45 minutes to the Kobe YMCA. There we received our daily assignments and travelled by bicycle to our posts. After combing the area for victims in teams of 3, some went to food distribution points, some clothing distribution, and my team went to the elementary school which housed tens of thousands of the displaced, where we entertained the children.

The scenes have not left me. Two stories of a four story retail building lifted off and set on its side; the 5th and 6th floors of an 8 floor apartment building crushed like an oreo filling; blocks of 2 floor houses with no front, resting at a 20° tilt, a 6 square block residential neighborhood with only one building remaining upright; and lots of small things like a shelf of rice buns in a bakery that were never baked. There were traumatic stories of people trapped beneath the rubble crying out for the help that wouldn’t reach them before the fires started. We were all stunned and spent time debriefing each evening. One student, who had planned to complete his studies in the United States, was moved to ride the perimeter of the four main islands of Japan on bicycle before leaving it, to get to know it better.

The earthquake was the end of the world for thousands, and it happens in an instant. When the earth begins to shake beneath your feet, there is no stable frame of reference. You don’t know how long it will last or the damage it will cause. It may take the other components of your life that give you stability: your home, your business, your family, even your life.

I was drawn to the earthquake because the pandemic is doing something similar today, taking things we have counted on for stability. 49% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. More than half have no emergency fund. When businesses close, incomes cease, rents and bills come due, it is like the earth shaking beneath your feet. Nothing is the same. What you relied on for stability is gone. You are left without the foundation you thought would always be there.

As fearful as the earthquake may have been, Matthew says the encounter with the angel on the tombstone was even more fearful, describing the angel with a face like lightning. The soldiers guarding the tomb shook with fear. Consider their plight: earth shaking beneath their feet, stone rolled away from the tomb they are supposed to be guarding, and it is now empty, the friends of Jesus witnessing what is going on, and now in front of them, an angel with a face like lightning, and we know, angels always come with a message from the almighty God that changes things. This angel at the empty tomb of the one who was called the son of God, the king of the Jews challenges everything they have thought and done! Life, if it continues, is never going to be the same. In an instant they had lost everything that offered stability in their lives. Matthew describes them as shaking with fear and becoming like dead men.

The women were there and also fearful but they found comfort in the angel's message, telling them not to be afraid. This was the same comfort that Jesus gave when they met him on their way to tell the disciples. The presence of divine spirit is in their personal and faith stories. Joseph was offered comfort when the angel visited him in a dream to announce that Mary would have a baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Angel Gabriel offered Mary the same comfort when he told her she was the honored one to birth the savior. Zechariah was similarly comforted when the angel told him he would be father of John, called the Baptist. The shepherds were told not to fear when they were told of the birth in Bethlehem.

In each case the one encountering the angel is told not to be afraid and to do something, something that will change their life and the world. If you think your life is defined by what is currently around you, that change can fill you with fear and with dread, as it did the soldiers at the tomb. However, if you are open to divine intervention and guidance and receptive to God's calling and the changes it makes in your life, that fear is mixed with excitement, as it was for the Marys at the tomb.

This pandemic is fearful for many: the overworked medical workers, grocers and shippers, farmers whose markets have dried up, essential workers, nursing home attendants, and security personnel; but also people who are confined to a single room, those who fall ill and say their good byes at the ambulance or hospital door, those who lost their only income and can't pay their bills and those who won't see their families for months. Such a time is fraught with fear. What will the angel of God say to comfort them? What will the angel tell them to do? What will excite them? How will the resurrection story be told?

"Do not be afraid." "Go and be the church." "Go and tell the others that Christ is risen and resurrection is the way life is." "Life doesn't end here, even in death." Paul quotes Hosea in his first letter to the Corinthians 15:55, "Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death." In these postings, our church is finding new ways to communicate to the world. Members are learning new ways to correspond and meet. Families are getting to know each other. Educators

are reaching their students in new ways. Established patterns are breaking and new ones are being formed. One member is getting married. Another is finding a new way to do business. Those who are open to the call of God for a new time, open to being the church, telling the message of Christ and expecting the resurrected life that will follow this deadly time, will spend some of this time in prayer and meditation and look for the exciting opportunities ahead, both in this life and the life to come.

Let's return to the story. After her encounter with the angel Mary runs to tell disciples and on the way meets Jesus! I imagine she stops, perhaps suddenly, has difficulty at first believing it is him, but when she does, she falls and throws her arms around his ankles, hugging his feet. Is she speechless? What words pass between them before he tells her not to be afraid, to get up and tell the disciples he will see them in Galilee.

It reminds me of the song

And God will raise you up on eagle's wings

Bear you on the breath of dawn

Make you to shine like the sun

And hold you in the palm of God's hand.

We are being raised up. Go, tell and live the resurrected life. The door is open. Happy Easter. Amen.

