

Matthew 28:1-10 – April 16, 2017 (Easter)

In two days will be the anniversary of an event I will never forget. It was April 18, 2008. I was unmarried, at that point, and living alone on vicarage in Salem, Illinois. I had fallen asleep on the couch actually.

But I was rather abruptly awakened at around 4:30 in the morning. And in my groggy delirium, my first thought was that a helicopter had landed next to the house. It wasn't a crazy thought, actually. There was a medical rescue helicopter that regularly landed in and around the town.

And so I thought for sure that there had been a car accident outside the house and the helicopter was landing right by my front door. That's what it sounded like. That's what it felt like. There was a rhythmic thumping in the ground and a roar in the air. That made all the window panes and furniture shake and rattle with their own noise. It was kind of terrifying.

But just as I was gathering my wits to find out what was going on, it was gone. I went to the front door and looked outside. There was no car accident. There was no helicopter. There was nothing. It was perfectly dark and peaceful. And I really began to wonder if I had dreamt the whole thing.

I hadn't, as I soon found out. There was no helicopter, that's true. However, there was a 5.4 magnitude earthquake, centered just 60 miles away in Mount Carmel, Illinois. You may remember it on the news. You may even have felt it. It traveled for quite a distance.

It was an eye-opening experience. I had never been through an earthquake before. And it was surprising. Because when you think of an earthquake, the first thing you expect to remember is... quaking. You expect it to be all about the shaking of the earth. But what stuck with me most was the sound. The roar. Like that of a huge bass drum filling the air. Making my bones rattle with the noise.

It made me realize what was going on all those times in the Bible when it says there was an earthquake... and the sound of thunder. Guess what? An earthquake makes the sound of thunder. One boom after another after another. It's truly terrifying.

Yet, God frequently uses earthquakes. By my count, there are no less than 8 earthquakes specifically caused by God in the Bible. And it's interesting to note that they form a pattern. Because each time, God sends an earthquake just before he delivers an important message to his people.

There's the earthquake on Mount Sinai. God descends in fire and smoke. Shakes the entire mountain. Terrifies the people of Israel. And then brings Moses onto the mountain to give him the Ten Commandments.

There's the earthquake at the beginning of John's Revelation. The glory of heaven surrounds John. He sees the throne of God. The lamb upon the throne. The elders and the angels and the martyrs. And just as the seventh seal is broken for the message of God's wrath and redemption to be delivered to the Apostle, the earth begins to shake around him. Filling him with fear.

There's the prophets. Three of whom are called into their ministry with an earthquake. Isaiah, walking into the temple of God, and feeling the earth shake around him at the sound of God's voice. Elijah, hiding in the cave. Waiting as all manner of natural disaster rage around him, earthquakes included, before God's message finally comes in the still small voice. And Ezekiel, sitting in Babylon, called to be first prophet of the exile with the appearance of four bizarre creature who shake the earth around them. Three prophets called by earthquakes to deliver God's message to his people.

And then there's the earthquakes of Holy Week. First the earthquake at Jesus' crucifixion. The earth is darkened as the life drains from Jesus' body. He cries out to his Father, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And at the moment of Jesus' death, his Father answers. He answers with a great earthquake. That splits the rocks around Mount Calvary. That tears the curtain of the temple in two. That opens tombs and causes dead men to come alive.

And at that moment, we hear the message that God has for his people. We hear it from the mouths of pagan, Roman soldiers. Men who are the very last people on earth you would expect to be prophets. And yet men who see it all and proclaim: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

That's the entirety of God's message. You just murdered my Son. Your sin just put him to death. And I will shake the earth to make you see that. I will tear apart my own temple. I will rip open graves to make you realize. This was my Son whom I love. But you wouldn't listen to him.

For God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only Son. Sent... why? Because of our sinfulness. This never would have happened if it hadn't been for our rebellion against God's law. This never would have happened if it wasn't for our selfish pursuit of idolatry, lust, hate, and greed. Each one of us has fallen short of the glory of God every day of our lives. Which means each one of us bears the guilt of Jesus' death.

Peter may have said, "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." But he just as easily could have said, "You put him to death... I put him to death." Truly, this man was the Son of God. And he died because of me. He died to rescue me.

He died that I might know the cleansing of Holy Baptism. That I might know the freedom of repentance and the assurance of His complete absolution. He died that I might come to this altar as a sinner, unworthy to stand in his presence, and yet receive his very Body and Blood given to me for the remission of all my sins.

The message of the cross, the message of the earthquake that shook Jerusalem that Good Friday afternoon, is both a message of guilt and a message of love. And it comes to those we would least expect to hear it.

So also is the message of the earthquake on Easter morning. Because it too is a message of condemnation and a message of redemption. And it also is sent to people we would least expect. It's sent to the women who come to Jesus tomb. To women who are coming to prepare his body for permanent burial.

Why is it so unexpected that it would come to them? Well, because, truth be told, they are symbols of despair. They are there to do the job of a mortician. They carry perfume and spices with them because they expect the body to stink with decay. They may have loved Jesus in life, but in death they have no hope that he will ever be anything except a corpse in the ground.

And yet, it's to them that God sends a second earthquake. This time to tell them, "He is not here, for he has risen, as he said." You expect to find death. But he told you to expect life. Mary, you, of all people, should know better. Where is your faith? You watched him raise your brother Lazarus from the dead. He told you, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Death cannot hold Jesus. Death cannot keep him from giving you new life. And God will shake the earth until you learn never to despair of God's power and God's love. God will shake the earth until everyone hears that Christ is risen from the dead.

Because just as those women did, we bear good news. We bear earth-shaking news. They were sent to go tell his disciples. We are sent to go tell the whole earth. God has woken us up with an earthquake. He has shaken us until our bones rattles. And it is a terrifying thing to hear.

As Peter said, they put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who have been chosen by God as witnesses. To us who eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. Who eat and drink with him at this very altar. You and I are witnesses of the resurrection. And he has commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

In those earthquakes God had a message for us. And in those earthquakes, we have a message for the whole world. A message of judgment for sin and unbelief and the rejection of God's Law. But also a message of love. A message of salvation. A message of victory over sin, death, and the devil. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.