

“Earthquakes and Easter Faith”

Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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I feel a sense of obligation, as I begin our sermon on this Easter Sunday, to give you fair warning: I’m going to be asking for your participation in the sermon.

I can feel the excitement just emanating from the pews!
Don’t worry.
It won’t be hard.

While you’re getting ready, I’d like to show you something.
In fact, it’s something I would like to read to you.

I have in my hands this morning a piece of paper that I believe dates back to the year 1978. It’s something my mother found, many years ago, in the attic of the home in which I grew up, and she gave it me, and I put in a closet somewhere, totally forgot about it.

But this past week, my wife unearthed it.
It was sitting next to a photo of my 1st grade class.
So, I’m assuming I wrote it in 1st grade.

This is what it says:

“Jesus arose from the dead on Easter. That’s why we celebrate Easter. Easter is very, very special.”

And then there’s a drawing of what looks like a cross between a rat and buck-toothed Easter bunny.

I share this with you, not because it’s profound.

Or because it's in any way unusual for a first-grader.

I share it with you because I, of course, have no memory of writing this. Which means that farther back than I can remember, someone—my parents, my pastor, my Sunday School teacher—someone had shared with me the announcement.

You know the announcement, right?
It's how we began our worship this morning.
I say: Christ is risen!
You say: He is risen indeed!

See? I told you it was going to be easy to participate.

**The announcement is why we're here today.
And my question for you is this:
How will you respond to the announcement?**

Now, before you answer, I'd like you to think about it. Because not everyone responds in the same way to this announcement.

For example, if we were to read beyond our text for this morning, to the end of chapter 28, we would hear about how the risen Jesus met the eleven disciples in Galilee, on a mountain. And Matthew tells us that "they worshiped him; but some doubted."

If we were Mark's Gospel, we would hear about how the women leave the tomb in fear and silence.

And if we were Luke's Gospel, we would hear about how the women got it, but the men...well, when they heard the announcement, they called it an "idle tale."

Do you see why I want you to take a bit of time to consider your response to the announcement? In the Gospels, there's fear and silence and joy and doubt and faith...all because of the announcement.

In fact, I'll never forget how the daughter of a friend and colleague, Matt Fitzgerald—how his daughter, when she was very young, once responded to the announcement.

He writes:

“When our daughter was in kindergarten the church gave her and each of her Sunday School classmates purple plastic Easter eggs to take home. The egg contained a slip of paper. She was right in the midst of learning how to read so she seized on the paper's monosyllabic words as eagerly as if they were jellybeans. She read with confidence:

“He is...”

Then she paused, carefully considering both syllables in the third word.

“He is...raisins?”¹

He is raisins, he is risen...perhaps that's close enough if you're in kindergarten. But what about those of us who are no longer in kindergarten?

I think the difficulty you and I run into, when it comes to the announcement, is NOT that we cannot read it. It's that when Easter is over, we often have trouble remembering it.

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, “Thunderous yes: Preaching to the Easter crowds,” *The Christian Century*, April 2, 2014.

We get distracted, right?

By our to-do list, or by a toxic work environment, or by a loved one's illness, or by the news of death and destruction we hear every day...and the joy of the announcement—just starts to fade away...

It's why I'm grateful for Matthew's way of sharing the announcement with us today. Matthew is trying to tell us a story that we will not soon forget.

According to Matthew, what's the first thing the women experience as they approach the empty tomb?

(This is your second opportunity to participate.)

It comes before the announcement.

The first thing they experience is an earthquake!

“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.”

Have any of you ever been in an earthquake before?

When our family lived in Indiana, we woke up one morning to an earthquake. The house was shaking, the lamp on my bedside table was rattling. It was 5am. I was completely disoriented by what was going on, more than a little scared....

No destruction where we were, but still.

An earthquake is something that's **HARD** to forget.

I think that's why Matthew tells the Easter story the way he does.

Matthew is **NOT** just making a geological statement.

He's making a theological statement.
Earthquakes in the Bible are apocalyptic events.

They are a way of announcing, in dramatic fashion, that a NEW ORDER has arrived, a NEW AGE has dawned.

As one commentator puts it:

“Somewhere along the path to the cemetery...[the women] left one world and entered another. Without even knowing they had crossed the border, they left the old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right...and the rich get richer...and dead people stay dead, and they entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life.”²

According to Matthew, Easter is about crossing a border.
It's about a “change in citizenship.”

It's about leaving the world we used to live in and entering the kingdom to which we truly belong. Easter is big and bold stuff in Matthew's Gospel, because he knows, on any given day, we might forget.

We might forget which kingdom we belong to...

I'm reminded of a story that the late former president of Princeton Seminary, Dr. Tom Gillespie, loved to tell.

Before he became Princeton's president, he was serving a church out in California and was working in his office one day when the secretary buzzed him.

² Thomas G. Long, “Matthew,” Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997.

“Someone’s here to see you,” she said, and she said it in a way that told Dr. Gillespie he might enjoy this unexpected visitor. So there was a knock on his door, and the secretary walked in with a five-year-old girl, wearing her best dress, looking very formal and proper.

“This young lady has a question for you,” the secretary reported.

Now Dr. Gillespie felt that he had a way with young children, so he squatted down to her level, and said, “Amanda, what’s your question?”

“I want to know what we’re going to eat in heaven.”

Dr. Gillespie wasn’t expecting THAT, but he thought quickly and said, “Well, here on earth we have physical bodies and that means we eat physical food. But in heaven, the Apostle Paul says we’ll have spiritual bodies, and that means we’ll eat spiritual food.”

Amanda said thank you.
She walked out.

And Dr. Gillespie overheard his secretary ask Amanda:
“What did he say?”
“He said he doesn’t know the answer either...”³

Now what did Dr. Gillespie do right there?
He didn’t just make up an answer.
He did what so many of us do.
He forgot who it was he belonged to...

A God who doesn’t expect us to always have the answer.

³ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Tom Long for this story.

But a God who, in raising Jesus from the grave, has shown US a love and a grace that refuses to let us go, even when we DON'T have all the answers...

Have you ever been in that place, where you didn't have the answer?

The answer for how you failed.
Or for why your loved one did what they did.
Or the answer for why your life did not go as you hoped that it would go.

That's the second thing we tend to forget about the announcement.
That there's a cross in this announcement.
I hope you remember that.

I hope you remember that the very Son of God also knew what it's like not to have an answer:

“My God, my God,” Jesus cried from the cross, “why have you forsaken me?”

And then—in a stroke of brilliance—do you know what Matthew does? He links the cross to...an earthquake!

In other words, the earthquake we heard about at the empty tomb is the **SECOND** one Matthew mentions. The first took place right after Jesus died:

“Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’”

Do you see what that first earthquake tells us?

It tells us there is no resurrection without a cross.
 It tells us that when we find ourselves carrying a cross, God
 promises to carry us.

Because the God of Easter is a God whose love is much deeper
 than our love.

A God whose ways are not like our ways.
 A God whose promise to redeem the world is beyond our ability to
 grasp or understand or explain.

Getting back to my colleague, Matt Fitzgerald, he writes:

“The first thing we...ought to admit on Easter is that God has done
 the incomprehensible. But not the illogical...”

“‘He is raisins is illogical.
 ‘He is risen’ is merely incomprehensible...”

“We prize the mind’s ability to penetrate, grasp, order, and
 assimilate, but in this case our
 [befuddlement and bedazzlement...
 our sense of wonder and awe and astonishment
 at what God has done] is a very good thing.”⁴

Let me get at it like this.

The Village Vanguard in New York City is a jazz club. And on one
 Tuesday evening some years ago, Wynton Marsalis was part of a small
 combo offering up a series of bebop classics.

⁴ Matt Fitzgerald, “Thunderous yes: Preaching to the Easter crowds,” *The Christian Century*, April 2, 2014.

The set started off in an unremarkable way,
but then Marsalis stepped to the microphone to offer a solo
called "*I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You.*"

It was a melancholy song, full of murmurs and sighs, and Marsalis performed it with deep feeling and expression. At the climax of the song, he played the final phrase in such a way that the trumpet seemed to give actual voice to the heartfelt words:

"I don't stand ... a ghost of a chance ..."

**The audience sat in awe, listening in silence.
And then it happened.**

In the middle of that sacred silence, at the song's most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off! And everyone could hear the chirping, sing-song electronic melody.

Including Wynton Marsalis.

In an instant, the spell was broken.
Marsalis paused for a beat, and stood motionless.
His eyebrows arched.

The embarrassed cell-phone owner fled the scene, and the conversation in the club started to grow louder. Of course, Marsalis could have stepped down at that moment.

But he didn't move.
He stayed right where he was.

*And he put his trumpet to his lips,
and replayed the stupid cell-phone melody...note for note.*

Then he played it again.
 Then he began improvising variations on the tune.
 The members of the audience stopped chatting and began to listen.

He changed keys once or twice and then seamlessly eased back into a ballad tempo, and in just a few minutes, finishing his improvisation, he was exactly where he had left off:

*“I don’t stand a ghost ... of a chance ... with you ...”*⁵

Now if Wynton Marsalis can do that with a trumpet, how much more can the risen Christ do with you?

Do you think it’s possible that the risen Christ
 can take the unexpected twists and turns in your life—
 and redeem them in a way you cannot foresee?

Do you remember the announcement?
 Christ is risen!
 He is risen indeed!

Good.
 See, I told you it was going to be easy for you to participate.
 Of course, your participation doesn’t end with the sermon.

How will you respond to the good news of this Easter day?

May I make a suggestion?
 Do what the women did long ago.

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey’s sermon “Capacity,” preached on April 20, 2014 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC, for first making me aware of this story. The story appears in “Wynton’s Blues,” by David Hajdu, in *The Atlantic*, March, 2003.

Just take the next faithful step, in your faith journey.

But as you do...

make sure you leave some room,
for the imagination,
and the improvisation,
of the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The God who promises that the risen Christ will meet you on your
way.

Alleluia!

Amen.