

Everything Is Still Shaking
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
04/24/11

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 28:1-10

NRSV

¹ After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The Sermon

We are about to share the experience of a remarkable video recording. What we'll be viewing gives visual evidence of the power of the resurrection - a power that not only gets people on their feet, but gets them moving, in a joy-filled manner, in a huge public square in Budapest, Hungary.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5dSIL358NM&feature=related>

You Tube reports that well over one million people have viewed it.

Though not a traditional way to demonstrate the "power of the Resurrection," it indicates that there is something about the choice to believe in it that warrants our attention this Easter Sunday 2011.

That power is best symbolized in a four-letter word, ***Life***.

The resurrection is a "God-event" which defies human description.

Thankfully, each of the Gospel writers attest to that, given that they make no attempt to narrate how or when Jesus emerged from the tomb. Instead, in various ways, they describe through their theological lenses subsequent human experiences of discovering an empty tomb, but not of the resurrection itself.

Each of the writers we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have accounts of the resurrection. Each has a woman or women going to the tomb. What the women find, or experience varies, but the common denominator is that a tomb is for the dead, and Jesus is no longer dead, but alive.

But the crucified Jesus who we also know as the Risen Lord, didn't morph into a super-hero as a consequence of his resurrection. Instead, if anything, the focus shifts from Jesus' words, and Jesus' deeds, to those who had followed him during his life span, and the question

become whether they will use his death and resurrection as a spur to new-found courage and new-found life, or will remain so focused on the cross and the tomb that they become mired in grief, rather than empowered through his offer of new life.

On Resurrection Sunday the focus is, naturally, on the power of God to overcome human mortality. But note well that Jesus' resurrection didn't mean no one ever again died in the physical sense. Jesus' resurrection didn't mean that his followers were suddenly whisked to heaven.

No, the primary question was whether or not the followers of the Jesus who was crucified, would remain mired in grief at Calvary, or mired in guilt over having abandoned him in his hour of need, or spent their time blaming one or another for this, that, or whatever, or step out in the faith that Jesus had indeed invited them - as brothers and sisters - to meet him if they had sufficient faith to leave Jerusalem and return home to the Galilee, where Jesus promised the women that he would meet them.

Symbolically, the women in Matthew's account of the resurrection joined the "Resurrection Dance."

Will you join the Resurrection Dance or won't you?

It's your choice.

Will you live your life in a confined space, a "prison cell? Or would you prefer to live your life "out of the box?"

Who would possibly choose for confinement over freedom?

One would think that the answer would be "No one!"

Yet the reality is that at varying points in their lives virtually everyone does.

We winnow down our life choices.

We categorize events and experiences as "important" vs. "insignificant." The more we determine what is crucial to our life plan; the more we dismiss people, places, and possibilities that might throw a monkey wrench into our preconceptions of what our lives are meant to be.

Kathy and I have heard so often, "I wish I (or we) had the courage to make changes as you have, but...."

And it's that "but" which becomes the box that limits us.

Someone once said that the only difference between a *rut* and a *grave* is the depth of the depression.

Popular Christian writer and preacher Leonard Sweet suggests that Easter is all about blowing out the top and the sides of the boxes which confine us.

Sweet's conception of Easter is that it is all about unlooked for possibilities.

Easter is all about the enormity of new ways to live and breathe and have your being.

For our children we put Easter in the context of baby chicks and brightly colored eggs – the symbols of new life. But the real guts of Easter is much more confrontational and challenging. Easter is the possibility for a truly new beginning. A beginning that can only emerge after a truly conclusive closure.

If every year's Easter is a celebration of a resurrection, then every year something must die to this world, in order to find itself re-born.

The women Mary Magdalen and the “other Mary,” who journeyed to view Jesus’ tomb, were without hope of anything but staring at a rock-blocked cavern. But they were knocked upside the head by no less than an earthquake. The earth upon which these women stood, the strata upon which they trusted their existence, shifted and changed as they viewed the tomb. The “earthquake” Matthew recorded was a “faithquake” – for the world of faith was forever jolted and regenerated from that moment on.

Notice that I said the “world of faith” was forever changed.

In the midst of serious theological reflection, Matthew injects some humor about how our preconceptions govern our reactions.

Prior to the resurrection, Jesus was the dead person and it was the guards who were alive. But once the angel came in the midst of the earthquake, it became evident that Jesus was no longer in the tomb and it was the guards along with the ground who shook and they became like *dead men*.

I like the way theologian and noted preacher Tom Long describes what happened on Easter Sunday morning, and the implications that has for us.

Long writes:¹

Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” the same women who had been witnesses of the crucifixion and the burial of Jesus, went early on the first day of the week to see the tomb of Jesus (Matt. 28:1). What they expected to see, of course, was Jesus’ grave, a monument to the sadness they felt in the soul, a confirmation of the cruel truth that the world finally beats mercy and righteousness to death.

Somewhere along the path to the seminary, however, they left one world and entered another. Without even knowing that they had crossed the border, they left the old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, and peace has little chance, and the rich get richer, and the weak all eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another, and people hatch murderous plots, and dead people stay dead, and they entered the startling and breathtaking word of resurrection and life. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been dead as a door-nail on Friday afternoon, was not in his tomb that morning, and the world -

¹ Thomas C. Long. *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion Series. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997

theirs and ours - has been turned upside down ever since.

The call to worship on that first Easter was not a cheery “Good Morning!” but a shattering earthquake that rippled a seismic shock through history and signaled that the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope (Matt. 28:2)

We are all aware that Jesus’ resurrection didn’t change everything everywhere. The “old world of power and corruption is still incredibly strong. There are many across most all religious and political lines willing to exercise power and control and to squelch or to mock Good Samaritans as being “out of touch “goody-goodies.”

However, the Easter story makes it very clear that resurrection faith was not confined to one Sunday morning and to a few faithful folk.

It can and does continue for those willing to step or break out of the boxes that confine them, and into the light of Christ’s love and grace.

This I believe, and your presence here today leads me to the conclusion that you do as well.

Thanks be to God for granting us the eyes of faith.

Amen.