

THE DAY THE EARTH SHOOK

MATTHEW 28:1-10; COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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This week, I came across a prayer for pastors on Easter Sunday, written by former pastor and current author, and speaker, Brian McLaren:

Dear Lord, I pray for all the pastors today
Who will feel enormous pressure to have their sermon
Match the greatness of the subject
and will surely feel they have failed.
(I pray even more for those who think they have succeeded.)¹

I resonated very much with this prayer. This Sunday is unique among all the other Sundays that we gather together.

This is *the* Sunday. The Sunday without which all the other Sundays would be meaningless. This is the Sunday where God snatches life out of the jaws of death.

What words could I say—what words could *any* of us say?—to do justice to this astonishing reality?

What could or should we do but stand with those first women at the tomb, with the dumb-founded disciples, mouths agape in awestruck wonder at the fact that ***he is not here?***

This Sunday, of *all* Sundays, is a Sunday for joyful proclamation, not explanation.

However.

(You knew there would be one of those didn't you? ☺)

Even though we don't know what to say, we can't say nothing. As St. Augustine said that St. Augustine said, "we can't not speak in the face of such wonder and mystery."

¹ <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/a-prayer-for-pastors-on-easter.html>

We are confronted with this story of a crucified Jewish prophet and an empty tomb.

And, we are confronted by this story in a cultural context, and sometimes even a *church* context where we have trouble believing that such things could happen.

We hear poetic language about how Easter is symbolic of the new life of spring, or of how Jesus was raised “in the hearts of his disciples” but we really shouldn’t take these things so literally.

The resurrection has become part of the furniture of religion, something we either reduce to an inoffensive metaphor or consign to the dusty attic of our faith, tucked away, no longer able to astonish us as it ought to.

So, we can’t say nothing. But what should we say? What does Matthew’s account of this old, old story have to say to us today?

One day this week, I was helping Claire with her science homework. Well, actually, I don’t think I was helping her much, but I was in the same room as Claire and her homework and attempting to make semi-intelligible comments about the subject she was working on.

She was working on geological processes. In particular, her homework had to do with plate tectonics. She was answering questions about seismic shifts.

Question 4c): What happens when an oceanic plate collides with a continental plate? What’s the result? Answer: an earthquake or, in some cases, a tsunami.

There is a rupture in the structure of the earth. There is a massive disruption in what was. Something huge changes, often in terrifying ways.

I was thinking about Claire’s science homework as I read and reread the accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection in Matthew’s gospel.

There is something peculiar about Matthew’s account of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Both when Jesus dies and when the tomb is rolled away revealing an empty tomb, Matthew says some variation of “the earth shook.”

On the cross, when Jesus dies, we read what must surely be among the more puzzling paragraphs in the entire Bible:

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.
⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

Then, three days later we see the words that we have already heard this morning:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

Two earthquakes: One when Jesus dies and one when is raised from the dead.

Only Matthew presents Jesus' death and resurrection in this way.

All four gospels have the women at the tomb, the stone rolled away, and some kind of angelic presence.

Matthew Mark and Luke all record darkness coming over "all the land" at Jesus death and the curtain of the temple being torn in two (John doesn't mention these things).

But only Matthew has the earthquakes. Why?

It's important to remember that the writers of the four gospels were not the equivalent of first century journalists who were attempting to present some kind of "objective," detached, or dispassionate account of the events around that first Easter.

So often we with all of our historical distance from the first events come these stories and say, "just give me the facts." We get uneasy when the four gospels tell the story in different ways. We wonder about discrepancies and apparent contradictions. "Just tell me what happened," we say!

But this was not the way of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. History and theology were not separate disciplines, but necessarily intertwined.

These were companions of Jesus. They had watched him teach and preach and heal and perform signs and wonders. They had been with him as he clashed with the religious authorities and the forces of the Roman Empire. They had watched him suffer and die on a cruel Roman cross. They had deserted him in his moment of greatest need. In the case of Peter, they had explicitly betrayed him.

And as they record these events decades later (the four gospels were all written in the second half of the first century, roughly from 60-70 AD to 90-100 AD, nearly half a century after Jesus' death and resurrection), their primary concern is not to relay a moment-by-moment transcript of events, but *what these things mean!*

The facts are not unimportant to them. Far from it. But they are not *just* relaying facts, they are eager to tell us what these facts meant to them and what they *did* in the world.

These are not people speaking about a mystical inner experience of how even though Jesus died, he remained alive in their hearts. These are people who are grasping to understand and explain something utterly unexpected, something they were not prepared for, something that blew apart their categories for who God was and how God worked in the world.

And what the cross and empty tomb *did* was shake the foundations of the world. It was like worlds colliding.

The Jewish world that nurtured Jesus and kept alive the story of salvation... and the radical embrace of God's generosity, God's open embrace for all nations.

Law... and grace.

Justice... and mercy.

Humanity... and God.

Evil... and good.

Violence... and peace.

Misplaced expectations... and the surprising, counterintuitive fulfillment of God's promises.

Despair... and hope.

Death... and life.

All these plates were shifting and colliding when Jesus breathed his last and gave up his spirit on a Roman cross, and when, three days later, the two Marys encountered an empty tomb.

The earth was moving and something new was being born. The "old order is breaking up and a new one dawning."²

The resurrection was not just a really cool miracle that proved that Jesus was divine or God's Messiah, but that the new creation was being born.

In these events, God's story was taking a decisive turn, fulfilling a promise made way back in Genesis 3, when it says that the seed of Adam would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

The earth shook. And things have never been the same, for those who have eyes to see.

We tend to associate earthquakes with death and destruction, chaos and pain.

Matthew's earthquakes? These earthquake results in life. At the cross, mysteriously, the holy dead rise and went to Jerusalem (Matthew 28:51-53). At the empty tomb, the earthquake is followed by an angel, whose appearance is "like lightning," coming down from heaven and rolling back the stone in front of the tomb, announcing the news to shattered followers, "Do not be afraid... He is not here... Go tell his disciples... You will see him!"

And since the day the earth shook his followers have been living as if everything changed, as if because a dead man can come back to life, there is no situation in our world that is so dark and bleak and hopeless, that life cannot come springing forth.

² Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991), 399

There is a lot of apologizing for the church these days. For residential schools, for intolerance and judgmentalism, for racism and homophobia and gender inequality, for all kinds of historical injustices. This is all very appropriate. We need to be honest. The bride of Christ has always been far from spotless.

But we must *also* say that something was born on the day that the earth shook. Rippling out from that empty tomb has been a community that, while imperfect to be sure, has been one of the ways in God's project of recreation has taken and is taking place.

I think that we can scarcely imagine the ways in which our cultural expectations and imaginations have been shaped by the story of Jesus—even those who want nothing to do with Christianity.

So many of the institutions we cherish—our universities, hospitals, orphanages, so many of the things we take for granted like the primacy of democracy, human rights, the conviction that *all* human beings have value—so much of what is good and true praiseworthy about our world owes its origins, whether directly or indirectly, to men and women, over long periods of history, whose lives and imaginations had been touched by this story of a dead man rising from the dead, and breathing hope and life into the ashes of fear and despair.

So many people's lives have been transformed, for the good of the world. We all have our list of super-Christians, I think. People who go around the world proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, people who do grand things to make the world a better place, people who tirelessly speak the truth in a culture of half-truth and mis-truth.

But we should not immediately think of the super-Christians. There are so many ordinary people—people we rub shoulders with daily—for whom the empty tomb has meant that no matter how bleak things might look at any given moment in our world or in our lives, *life is stronger and more durable and lasting than death.*

So many ordinary people who have lived lives of service and truth and devotion out of a conviction that, as Paul puts it in our text from Colossians, we have been *raised with Christ* and therefore set free to set our minds on things that are far above this world with all of its death and darkness and decay.

Whether in big ways or small ways, we are people whose lives have been forever changed because of the day that the earth shook and the tomb was empty.

The resurrection isn't just the icing on the cake that concludes the transaction that began on the cross. It is God's way of validating the entire life and ministry of Jesus, his entire way of being in the world, his entire mission of peace and proclamation of good news to the poor, his entire way of embodying justice and truth—everything about who Jesus was, everything about what he taught and did is validated at the resurrection.

The resurrection is God's way of saying that the kingdom of God is real and true. It has come and it is coming and it will come in fullness.

And the resurrection asks questions of us, too.

We have to choose, each one of us, whether or not we are going to be resurrection people.

Whether or not we are going to succumb to the easy cynicism of a culture that has moved beyond God to a more "realistic" way of looking at the world.

We have to choose, each one of us, whether or not we are going to embrace the new life that Jesus' offers. Whether or not we are going to accept the gift of life and hope that Jesus invites us to.

This is something that many of have decided long ago. But it's also something we need to decide every day of our lives.

I close with Paul's familiar words to the church in Corinth. *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied* (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Not "admired for our social ethic," not "basically decent people who got the end of the story wrong," not "on the right track," not "one partial representation of the universal truth that all religions and philosophies are grasping toward."

Paul leaves us no wiggle room. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, *everything* we say about Jesus is a sham, and we are nothing less than objects of pity.

BUT, if Jesus *has* been raised from the dead...

Well, then everything changes. Then the plates shift and the earth shakes and nothing is ever the same again.

If Jesus *has* been raised from the dead, we are forgiven, healed, and set free to live as resurrection people.

