

aftershocks

Matthew 28:1-11; Colossians 3:1-4 Preached FCCW

Easter 4-16-2017

In March of 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck.

What earned it the title of "Great" was the fact that it was the biggest earthquake ever to hit Japan.

But the quake itself was just the beginning.

After the quake, came the tsunami.

Then there were the aftershocks, which continued for several years following the original event.

Aftershocks literally became a part of life there for several more years.

But the longest lasting aftershocks were not the sort that are measured by seismologists.

Japanese doctors began reporting cases of people experiencing "phantom quakes"; who swore that the ground was shaking under their feet even when it wasn't,

or who would see a tree branch moving in the wind and think another quake was happening.

We don't usually associate Easter with earthquakes.

Maybe because, of the four gospels, only one -- Matthew-- reports an earthquake being part of the resurrection story.

Early on the morning after the Sabbath was over, two women come to the tomb where Jesus was buried after the crucifixion.

They come, even though they know that the entrance to the cave is sealed with a large stone, and Roman soldiers are guarding the premises.

That's when, Matthew tells us, a "great" earthquake happens.

This earthquake is unique in that it isn't generated by a sudden release of energy in the earth below, but from heaven above.

The earthquake on Easter is caused by an angel, who rolls the massive stone away from the door to the tomb, and then perches himself defiantly on top of it.

This was some serious angel body language. And it added weight to his first words to the women

disciples.

"Do not be afraid."

In fact, it is the Roman soldiers posting guard nearby; who were the ones who were afraid; so scared they had become like "dead men."

"Don't be afraid" spoken from the lips of an angel is the first hint to those who followed Jesus while he was alive, that the people who killed Jesus weren't as much in charge as they thought they were.

That is the message that the angel delivers to the two Marys who came to the tomb.

"Do not be afraid."

The message that they didn't have to fear the guard detail, who were, by now quaking in their boots and paralyzed in terror.

That it wasn't necessary to fear the authorities who had condemned Jesus and threatened his followers.

No need, in fact, for them to ever fear anything that they would face in the future, because there was nothing that they would ever have to face alone again.

"Jesus is going ahead of you," he assured them.

Whatever tomorrow held for them, Jesus would already be there waiting.

It didn't take long before the angel was proven right.

On their way to go and tell the other disciples what they had seen and heard they are intercepted by the risen Jesus.

He repeats the angel's message-- "Do not be afraid" -- because sometimes we need to hear that message more than once, don't we?

Then he sends them on their way to tell the rest of his disciples that he is risen, and going ahead of them all to Galilee.

And, sure enough, when they get to Galilee the risen Jesus is there waiting for them -- true to his word.

Before long, they are seeing the resurrected Jesus all over the place.

They saw him in a Jerusalem room where they were hiding out from the authorities.

Other disciples met him on a road to Emmaus when their hearts were still weighed down with grief because the news about his resurrection had not yet overtaken the news of his crucifixion.

It was as if people whose eyes only knew to look for death and despair, were being retrained to see new life and impossible possibilities.

Easter is at its heart a story about aftershocks generated by that first quake.

Usually, earthquakes earn the title of "great" based on their power to bring destruction and death.

The Easter Earthquake in Matthew's Gospel, was great because of its power to bring life and hope.

The original message delivered to two frightened women began a chain reaction of announcements that has swept through history.

Jesus is risen!

The echoes of that message are like aftershocks from that Great Easter Earthquake, when the angel rolled aside the door to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid.

Not so he could get out but so that we could see in and know that he was not there, anymore.

We are here to receive the message again, or maybe for the first time, today.

To experience the aftershock of that announcement for ourselves.

Jesus is Risen!

We have our own part to play in the aftershock of the Great Resurrection Earthquake

by witnessing to the hope-filled, fear conquering, news of resurrection through our lives, the way that so many before us have faithfully done.

You and I are called to live in a way that demonstrates the truth that Christ is risen.

The Easter experience of resurrection is solidly grounded

in a historical event in which Jesus was raised.

But each Christian also has a resurrection to a new life in Christ.

Because of this, Easter can be not just a celebration of a past event, but of a present experience.

An aftershock of that original event that took place in an anonymous tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

The apostle Paul described the impact of Easter on the lives of believers this way in his Epistle to the Colossians:

"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

He didn't say, "You will be raised with Christ." He said you already are raised with Christ."

Who knew that an earthquake may be a good way to understand the meaning of Easter, after all?

Because of the Resurrection, our world has shifted. The tectonic plates of reality have shifted.

Resurrection is the new normal.

But can we say that the resurrection really changed anything, when the world doesn't seem any different?

When there is still so much violence, suffering and oppression?

Maybe "WHAT changed?" is the wrong question to ask.

The better question might be, "Who changed?!"

The good news of Easter is not that the world suddenly was transformed into a perfect paradise, but that ordinary men and women were changed.

And that the change wrought in them holds the potential to transform the world.

In the weeks after the earthquake in Japan, more than 2,000 bodies swept up on the shoreline. Exhausted rescue workers were shocked at the horror of so much loss of life. Time magazine reported the pivotal moment when horror turned to hope:

"More accustomed to hearing the crunching of rubble and the sloshing of mud than sounds of life, they dismissed the baby's cry as a mistake.

Until they heard it again.

They made their way to a pile of debris and carefully removed fragments of wood and slate, shattered glass and rock. And then they saw her: a 4-month-old baby girl in a pink woolen bear suit. A tidal wave literally swept the baby from her parents' arms when it hit their home.

'Her discovery has put a new energy into the search,' a civil defense official told a local news crew. 'We will listen, look and dig with even more diligence after this.'"

In the face of a tidal wave of corpses, it was the discovery of one single baby in a pink bear suit who defied all the odds by being alive, that sent aftershocks of hope in the midst of crushing despair and energized rescuers to look at the devastation around them with new eyes, eyes trained to detect life in the midst of death.

And in the face of all the world's tragedies and despair,
one earthquake,

at one empty tomb,

caused by one angel,

leading to one encounter with the risen Jesus,

by one pair of disciples whose joy overrode their fear,

and believing, went and told others –

has sent aftershocks of hope across the millennia.

Fortunately, very few of us will face a disaster the magnitude of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

But very few, if any, of us will get through life unscathed by personal traumas or tragedies.

Most of us experience the aftershocks of those events like "phantom quakes."

Haunted by past losses, failures and rejections – we expect life to hold nothing but more of the same in our future – so that the earth never really feels solid under our feet in the present.

Easter trains us, not to look away from life's calamities, but to recognize the life-giving presence of Christ even in their midst, and to dig into the work to which Christ calls us with greater energy and diligence, because we believe that Christ has opened the way for us, not only in death, but also in life. Resurrection does not deny the tragedies and injustices of life, but it places them in a larger and more hopeful context.

Easter is more than a promise of a paradise waiting for us in the next life.

Easter is a promise that life is meant to be good here and now.

Easter is a promise that God's power is active in this moment, in all places, in all lives. In your life.

Easter tells us that our eternal life doesn't wait around for us to die in order to be with Christ.

Eternal life begins now with, Jesus going ahead of us wherever it may be that we are headed, and waiting for us to get to where he is already.

Life, even your life, may still feel like one big disaster when we our sights are fixed on death.

But God is full of life.

And so are we, because Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed!

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