

“Surviving the Earthquake”

Jeremiah 31: 1 – 6     Matthew 28: 1 – 10

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The scene was somber, depressed even. It was early on the morning after Sabbath. You can imagine what it felt like for the two Mary's as they walked through the cool misty morning towards the grave where the body of Jesus had been placed two days before. All of their hopes and dreams had vanished when he was crucified. They had believed so much and had stayed with him to the end, every moment anticipating that God would act through their beloved Messiah. But nothing had happened: just an agonizing death, agonizing to Jesus, and agonizing to those loving friends, family and compatriots who watched him die. All the women could do was take care of the body now that the Sabbath was over. They were expecting to cry over Jesus' body while they prepared it for a proper burial. Their grief was an enormous weight on their shoulders as they walked slowly to the tomb.

Perhaps in the recesses of their mind, they wondered how much longer they would have to wait before the Real Messiah would actually come. Even deeper in their minds, was this slight but tenacious belief that they hadn't been wrong after all, that there must still be more to the story. But that was too much to hope for aloud. All they could do was go through the motions of walking to the tomb and taking care of the body according to their faith and custom.

They certainly weren't prepared for the earthquake! Oh, how it rumbled through their ears; how it wobbled their knees. It was as if the very foundation of their being was falling apart. Wasn't it enough that their beloved Jesus was dead? Why was God visiting this awful earthquake on them now? Enough! Enough!

But, somehow through the noise and the terrifying heaving of the ground under their feet, they heard something. What was that? Raised? Not dead? Alive? See him again?

Wait a minute. Jesus did say something like that, didn't he?

Alleluia, Jesus hadn't been beaten after all. The clear message on that Easter Day, and this one, is that Death has been overcome. What wonderful news. Rejoicing! Alleluias!

OK, Let's go home.

But wait a minute, why are my knees still shaking. Something is not right. I should be happy and content. "The strife is o'er, the battle won!" We got our happy ending! It should be time for the Easter Sermon to be over and the celebration to begin.

Yes, this is where we often stop in our Easter deliberations. But I invite us to try going a little further today. First of all, are we sure we know what we are so happy about? Do we realize the implications of what we are celebrating today?

What we might think we know – what Christian theology has said for centuries – is that the resurrection is the defeat of the power of death, and the ransom has been paid for our eternal lives by means of Jesus sacrifice.

We already know about how the expectations for the Messiah did not come about, and we already know about the mixture of uncomfortable feelings that arose from that huge disappointment. And in our healthy Christian liberal theology, we know that grieving the loss of an old image of God as the powerful fixer creates the space within us to receive a new image.

That's where we are now: as the aftershocks of the earthquake recede, a space has shaken loose in us and we are ready to receive something new.

But, what image of God shall we receive? And, what difference will embracing this new image really make in our lives.

Let's start by looking at the image of God we are familiar with and then look further to another possibility.

Here is the image of God we are used to at Easter. God is the Father, who is angry at the sinfulness of humans. Apparently, his sense of justice requires some form of punishment for that sinfulness, up to and including eternal banishment to Hell. Somehow a deal is worked out so that if the obedient son sacrifices himself, God's justice will have been served and the power of sin will have been eliminated in the world. God is still, at least potentially, the angry father, but Jesus stops him from taking his anger out on us. Nevertheless, God raises Jesus from death as a sign that the deal is completed and that we now have eternal life through Jesus.

That's the image I grew up with. How about you? For a long time, I never thought about it much. It never occurred to me that I could look at God any differently. Christianity said this is how things work, so I accepted it. Having thought about it more over the last many years, I have discovered some shortcomings in what this description says about God and our relationship with God.

Let me try to explain what I mean. This traditional image requires that we see ourselves as needy people who are made safe by the violent sacrifice of the good and obedient son (Jesus) on behalf of the bad children (the rest of us). I am troubled by this image because I am so disturbed by the amount of violence in our world, from international relations to family life. I am disturbed at how often Christian theology has been used to justify so much violence over the centuries, and I don't believe that it is the most fitting image that we can take out of the crucifixion/resurrection events. Most of all, I am disturbed that Jesus is made out to be an example of how the weak should put up with violence from the strong. Jesus' acceptance of his fate came from his fully adult

strength of character and his decision to walk a particular road. It was not a moral mandate simply to put up with violence. Furthermore, I am appalled at the idea of a God who would require such a sacrifice. Anyone who grew up in an abusive family may already know how appalling that is.

So, if we have reservations about this image, what then is another way to look at it?

How about a God who doesn't need to feel threatened and angry even though we humans feel those things all the time?

How about a God whose primary characteristics are love and compassion, instead of violence, punishment, and revenge?

How about a God who is willing to be where we are instead of requiring us to measure ourselves against some divine and therefore humanly impossible standard?

How about a God who wants us to "have life and live it abundantly", who doesn't want us to worry about whether or not we are acceptable or whether God loves us?

That's the picture of God I am learning to embrace.

Let me give you a small example. When my son, Luke, was about 4 years old, I remember coming home from work one evening to find him playing in his playroom. I stood there for the longest time, just watching with delight as he focused his attention on his play. He had no idea I was there. I realized I didn't need him to acknowledge my arrival, nor did I have any particular idea about how he should be playing. I learned something about God's love that day. I learned that if I was simply delighted in the person my son was becoming, how much more might God take delight in the person I am becoming.

Of course there are challenges that come along with that understanding of relationship with God. (Even with this more loving image, the earthquake can still wobble the knees.) Instead of clearly defined standards of behavior, against which we measure our adequacy, such a God wants us to grow, to discover who we are, "to become as honestly

who we are as Jesus was who he was.” We, then, can celebrate Easter as a festival of new life that begins today for each of us.

It won't be the same, living with this new image of God, and we will have to resist the temptation of putting God back into the “powerful fixer” role. There is a different kind of anxiety that goes with being real. If not the old fear of being found inadequate or sinful, our new anxiety springs from not knowing what we will face, how things will turn out, or what we will experience. There are no external measures to tell us we're OK. And, there also are no external measures to tell us that were not OK, either.

Easter is not the end, but the beginning. The work for us after Easter is pioneering work. We have the opportunity and perhaps the responsibility to discern the possibilities for our lives. How will this loving, non-judgmental image of God get communicated through the life and ministry of this church? We know that the first image is getting plenty of airtime in Christian fundamentalism. But, what do we mean when we proclaim, “We are a church because Christ is Risen”? What is the message we want people to hear? For that matter, what do our own ears hear in those words?

Well, now that the ground has stopped shaking and it feels a bit more solid again, we find ourselves faced with a challenge: to communicate, to all who will listen, an Easter story that proclaims God as the one who loves us so much, that our job is simply to engage life fully, learn all we can learn, enter into relationships of caring, trusting that no matter what, we will not be abandoned by God. Our challenge is to be a sanctuary where growth and responsibility are valued highly and where all are encouraged to become mature human beings who embrace the freedom given to us by means of God's love.

So I proclaim to you this Easter Sunday morning: Alleluia, Christ is Risen. He is risen, indeed.