

Text: Matthew 28: 1-12
Title: Easter's Earthquake
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This is my prayer for you ~ beautifully penned by Barbara Brown Taylor:

Happy Resurrection Day! May the news of Christ's risen-ness touch the dead spots in your heart and bring them back to life, so that you become part of the good news that flows forth from the gospel today. May you be springs of living water in all the dry places on this sweet, parched earth. May the fresh life that God has given you spill over to freshen all the lives that touch yours. May you be Easter people, this day and forever.

That is my prayer. What does that mean? Consider this....

On August 27, 1883 at 10:02 the island volcano Krakatoa erupted with creation changing cataclysmic force ~ estimated as the equivalent of 200 megatons of TNT, about 13,000 times the yield of the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima. It is thought to be the loudest sound in history ~ distinctly heard 3000 miles away. Ash was propelled 50 miles into the sky. The island was blown to bits. Tsunamis spread across the ocean. The climate was affected for a few years and the colors of sunsets around the world were changed for months.

In fact, Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream* was his response to the sky over Norway after the eruption. In his words:

Suddenly the sky turned blood red... I stood shaking with fear and felt an endless scream passing through nature.

Underneath this island volcano was a complex mix of plates and vents and layers of rock and lava; and with a seismic shift, the movement of the earth, everything changed.

Matthew writes of the resurrection with that kind of seismic shift, creation quaking, everything shaking, cosmos changing, cataclysmic upheaval.

Luke does Easter as a meal on Sunday evening.

John has the risen Jesus encounter Mary in the garden.

Mark's gospel features an abrupt ending with the women fleeing the tomb...

But, Matthew's point of emphasis is not a quiet mysterious moment in a deserted garden, but rather the radical reversal of the created order.

Matthew writes that at the death of Jesus all hell broke loose: The sky turned dark, the curtain temple was torn from top to bottom, the earth shook, rocks split, tombs broke open, dead people were resurrected, and soldiers were terrified. In recounting the burial of Jesus he piles on details to confirm that Jesus was, in fact, dead.....

Dead dead; really dead; dead as dead could be, dead.

Joseph of Arimathea takes the body of Jesus, wraps it in clean linen, places it in a new tomb cut into rock, and rolls a big boulder in front of the entrance. Then, for an extra measure of protection, Pilate has his seal put on the stone and his men standing guard to make sure that Jesus stays dead. It has the feel of the build up to a magic trick.

But, as the page turns to the first day of new creation, everything changes.

Now, I am not sure that I ever thought about the resurrection as including an earthquake. There is little reason for an angel to require an earthquake. Angels are popping in and out of scripture all the time and I can't think of a single example where their appearance is linked to an earthquake. And, even though the stone is rolled away, men rolled it there in the first place, so that would not have required an earthquake. And, yet here in Matthew, Easter morn is shook by an earthquake.

Lent began on Ash Wednesday with the smudged reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. And the First Sunday of Lent included the grim proclamation that "You shall surely die..."

No matter, young or old, stooped or straight, boundless energy or beat down...
No matter who we are, our bodies will falter, fail, and finally give out. Our bodies will close up shop. The one thing of which we can be certain is that we will all die. It is written into the created order. And, when that dawned on Adam and Eve they scurried off to hide in the garden ~ naked, ashamed, and afraid.

But! But, what if this old world, bound over to death and strapped down with fear, collided with a new world? What if the tectonic plates of death and resurrection smashed into each other? What if the past and the present crashed into other? What if two world orders collided?

Well, wake the kids, put on a crash helmet, grab hold of something, strap yourself in, and buckle up ~ there's going to be an earthquake!

William Willimon ~ while Dean of the chapel at Duke ~ put it this way:

When the stone was rolled away, and the earth shook we got our first glimpse of a new world, a world where death doesn't have the last word, a world where injustice is made right, and innocent suffering is vindicated by the intrusion of a powerful God.

That is to say that:

The resurrection is not about the beauty of a crocus emerging from its soily tomb.

The resurrection is not the gentle cycle of spring's rebirth.

The resurrection is not the hopeful hop of a bunny or the new life of a chick chipping out of an egg.

The resurrection is not the resuscitation of a dead body.

The resurrection is not about the immortality of the soul.

The resurrection is the radical reversal of the way of this world.

The resurrection is the death of an old order and the birth of the new.
This old world is quaking and a new world is being born.
Thanks be to God!

Now as that is true we can grab our faces and scream, or we can do what the men and women do in Matthew's resurrection account

The soldiers fall way like dead men ~ the powers of this world can't stand ~ and the women run, afraid and filled with joy. There is little but their hearts beating, their lungs panting for breath, the slap of leather sandals on dry ground, until somehow Jesus appears and he says to them, "Don't be afraid...."

Don't be afraid.

There is a new world that has dawned.
The old order of things has passed away.
Sin is forgiven.
Death is defeated. Don't be afraid.
And creation shuddered, heaved, quaked, and a resurrected world was born.

Part of what it means to be Easter people is live in a new world order.
N.T. Wright ~ the Archbishop of Canterbury ~ puts it like this:

To put it at its most basic: the resurrection of Jesus offers itself...not as an odd event within the world as it is but as the utterly characteristic, prototypical, and foundational event within the world as it has begun to be. It is not an absurd event within the world but the symbol and starting point of the new world. The claim advanced in Christianity is of this magnitude: Jesus of Nazareth ushers in not simply a new religious possibility, not simply a new ethic or a new way of salvation, but a new creation.

Gulp!

Earthquake!

Everything is different than what it was!

So, don't be afraid!
Blow the trumpets and strike up the band.
Put on your dancing shoes and a funny hat.
Get out your best dress and your fancy suit.
Pour champagne for breakfast and have raspberries on chocolate.
This is a birthday party ~ a new creation is born.

It seems to me that if Easter's earthquake is just the story of Jesus shaking off the slumber of death, wiggling out of the burial cloth, and rolling the stone away, to slip out into the morning sun, so that you and I can go to heaven ~ then all this commotion is a lot of hoopla over a private personal matter. But, if Easter's earthquake is the breaking in of a new creation:

Then cancer doesn't have the last word.
Then terrorism may have a day, but it will finally be thwarted.
Then depression may cast a shadow, but it won't last.
Then swords will be beat into plowshares.
Then whatever is broken will be healed
Then death can shake a boney fist and drive a hard bargain,
but death is not the end ~ resurrected life is the end.

Easter's earthquake means that the very nature and substance of creation has changed and there is nothing to fear.

I think most of the time we're afraid because we live on the fault line. We have one foot in a dying world and one foot in a resurrecting world, and those two worlds keep bumping into and rubbing against one another. We know all too well the grim and tawdry reality of a dying world and yet we get little glimpses, little tastes, and little signs of a resurrecting world. But, we straddle both.

Well, to be Easter people is to live with our feet planted firmly in both worlds ~ without fear. To be Easter people is to live in the dying world with the commitments and hopes of the resurrecting world. To be Easter people is to seek, sweat, and pray for the *shalom* of resurrection because we know that all the obscenity of a dying world was buried in a rock tomb.

To be Easter people is to live on the fault line with the same hopes as Desmond Tutu, who in 1982 in the pitched battle to end apartheid in South Africa wrote:

Nothing could have been deader than Jesus on the cross. And the hopes of his disciples appeared to die with his crucifixion...And then Easter happened. Jesus rose from the dead. The incredible; the unexpected happened. Life triumphed over death, light over darkness, love over hatred, good over evil. That is what Easter means ~ hope prevails over despair. Jesus reigns as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Oppression and injustice and suffering can't be the end of the human story...

And that dear Easter people, is enough to quake the earth.
So, don't be afraid.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.