

“The Easter Shakes”
Text: Matthew 28:1-10
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So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Matthew 28:8

You are not wrong if you think that Easter has come a little early this year. This is the earliest Easter any of us has ever experienced, unless there is one of us who is 95 years old or older. If so, you may raise your hand, and we will applaud. [Ruth Wells, 96 years old, raised her hand, and the congregation did indeed applaud!] None of us will be around to see Easter the next time it lands on March 23, because that will take place 220 years from now.

I rejoice that Easter has come early. The good news of “Christ’s risenness,” in fact, could not come too soon for me or for our weary world. It is an understatement to say that we live in difficult times. Unsure about the future, we are also divided as to who ought to lead us toward the future. Issues we thought were settled long ago, such as race and gender, have risen to the surface again, are dividing our society again. These are troubling times. Foreclosure signs are appearing in neighborhoods all around this city and around the nation. The war – the war is going on into its sixth year now. The planet is warming. The economy is floundering. There is a lot to make us fearful and unhappy. But there is also the good news of Easter. There is a risen Christ out there, on the loose, “Christ the tiger,” T.S.Elliott once called him. Another poet, E.E. Cummings, maintains that “Easter is the defiance of despair”. This week, we have come to worship to defy despair by offering our thanks and praises to God, who raised Jesus from the dead, defeated the power of sin and death and delivered us from death to life eternal.

Here is a good way to think of Easter and its effect upon us and upon our world: Jesus who was crucified took all the bad stuff, the sins, the betrayals, the big ones and the little ones, all that would separate us from one another and from God, Jesus took it all with him to the grave. And now, he has come back to our world without them. (2) The old life is finished and gone. Behold, a new life has come. I am speaking of new life not only on the other side of the grave – life after death – I am speaking of the possibility, indeed, the reality of new life this side of the grave. If thinking that glad thought does not send shivers up and down your spine, then I don’t know what will. If you can’t feel joyful and hopeful today, in spite of the miseries around us, in the midst of whatever sadness or

disappointment you are going through, then let Easter have its way with you. Let Easter crack open your heart and give you a new lease on life, so that you may live in hope.

I learned an astonishing thing last week. The Eastern Orthodox Church, the second largest Christian communion in the world, has a very unusual tradition that takes place the day after Easter each year. Now, this is the tradition that is considered to be the most traditional, going back to its ancient liturgical roots. Believe it or not, on the day after Easter, the Eastern Orthodox congregants gather in their sanctuaries for services of worship. For the most part, worship consists of – you won't believe it – the priest standing in the pulpit, telling jokes. Imagine, a great stone sanctuary with incense still lingering from Easter Sunday. Imagine, the priest in all his regalia, leaning over the pulpit saying, "Hey, did you hear the one about...?" (3) Imagine people laughing until their shoulders shake.

In commenting on this practice, Martin Copenhaver, a Protestant minister confesses that it seems at first very strange. Then again, when you think about it, it seems "strangely fitting . . . Consider what might prompt us to laugh." Philosophers and psychologists have their ideas. "Sigmund Freud wrote a whole book on the subject." I have not read it. I understand it was a particularly deadly book, but Freud's favorite joke was in it. Here's the way it goes: "A husband says to his wife, 'Dear, if one of us should die, I think I'll go live in Paris.'"

Copenhaver offers a couple of favorites himself. The first is a groaner:

Knock- knock.

Who's there?

Why?

Why who?

Only one question at a time, please.

This next one is his young daughter's favorite: What do you call cheese that doesn't belong to you? Nacho cheese. While there is no consensus about what makes something funny, there is at least one recurring theme. There is a surprise there. There is a reversal of expectations. Something happens in the story that you didn't expect. The usual order of things is upended. (4) Now, is that a description of Easter, or what? After death, there usually comes ... the grave, and that's it. No! Easter says. You need to broaden your expectations.

One day over lunch last week, a friend of mine asked me how my Easter sermon was coming along. I had to confess it had not come along at all. My study at home was filled with note-scribbled legal pads, books open, 30 years' worth of

files all over the place. But the homiletical stone sat squarely in the mouth of the tomb. Then she said, "You know what the trouble with Easter is?"

"What?" I said.

"We already know the story," she said. "There are no surprises."

"Exactly!" I thought. I decided then and there to see if you and I could not recover at least some of the surprise and joy of that first Easter morning.

Really, who can barely help laughing, if you read Matthew's account of the resurrection? He is the one who goes into the greatest detail about the irrefutable fact that Jesus is dead as dead can be. He describes how Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus' body after the crucifixion, had it wrapped in a linen cloth, and then laid in his own tomb, newly hewn in rock. He tells us about how a great stone was rolled into the mouth of the tomb, and how there were eye witnesses, those witnesses being Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who watched it all happen. He described how Pilate really, really wanted to make the tomb even more secure, so he sent the Roman guards. The religious leaders of the day accompanied the guard and placed a seal around the stone. It's really funny, when you think about it. The Romans and the religious elite were in charge of everything, and yet, they were genuinely afraid of a dead man. Now, the dead are, by definition, dead. They don't move, speak, or otherwise cause trouble. They are still as stone, and yet all the power and authority of the Roman Empire are brought to bear lest what – the body be stolen? Why would one steal a corpse, unless for the purposes of having a funeral, and what would that hurt? Fear is the only reason I can think of. Fear that power might be lost. There was Pilate, having seen to it that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and still he was shaking in his slippers. It was funny, really. Think of him, unshaven that morning, the first day of the new week, pacing around in the palace, "I hope the body is still there..."

At the same time, just at dawn, the two Marys come back to the tomb. In Matthews account, there are no funeral spices. The women have come to get their minds around the finality of the events that have just taken place. Note they are the only ones who come. The disciples had fled in fear on Friday and had left Jesus to die for the most part, alone on the cross. As one has put it, "the disciples had disappointed him, misunderstood him, forsaken him, and fled into the darkness." (5) And now, in the light of the dawn, two women have come to confront the reality of death. But, just as they arrive, the greatest cosmic joke in history unfolds. First, an earthquake, a great earthquake, signifying a seismic reversal. The great stone rolls away like a child's little marble. An angel from heaven descends, his appearance like lightning, his clothing white as snow, and the best thing of all is that he is the only one there! Jesus is gone. The only others are the guards, who have gotten a big case of the Easter shakes and have become "like dead men." What the angel has to say is breath-taking. "Don't be afraid." Clearly, the women were trembling, wide-eyed, gasping for breath.

Never having seen an angel, never having been in the middle of an earthquake, not having a clue about where Jesus was, of course, they were afraid.

I don't know where you were last Friday evening when the tornadoes swept through Atlanta. I was home alone with our little dog Miss Patsy Cline. Both of us were trembling when the tornadoes came through. I have a friend who was in a large store when the announcement came over the loud speaker to go to the center of the store. She said she headed for the pillow aisle, which I thought was a lot better than buzz saws or gardening tools.

I don't blame God for those tornadoes, but I do know that great stone was rolled away by the power of God's great earthquake. I do know that when the earth shook that resurrection morning, the direction of human history took an abrupt turn toward hope, toward possibility, toward reconciliation. At that moment, death no longer had the last word. I know that it appears as though death has the last word, but don't you believe it. "I know you were looking for Jesus," the angel said. "He's not here. He's gone on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Isn't it interesting that the angel didn't seem to have much pity on the women? He didn't offer them a glass of water and a couple of aspirin. He didn't say, "Listen, you're probably going to need some therapy for post traumatic stress." No "I feel your pain." No "I feel your fear." Just a single, two-part imperative:
1) Don't be afraid.
2) Get yourself going.

The thing about fear is that we cannot do a thing about feeling it. It shows up, in response to real or imagined danger. What you can control is how you respond to fear. You can turn to stone and be paralyzed. You can overcome it, push through it, and act with courage, and do it again, and again, and again. I don't care what the situation is, we always have a choice in the face of fear.

The poet Browning put it well: "Trust God, see all, (never) be afraid."

What is so funny about life is that often what we fear, the tiger we fear, turns out to have no teeth. Remember how the fear of communism allowed this country to permit like Joseph McCarthy to compromise the deepest values of this great republic? (6) Another poet, Robert Frost has said, "There is nothing I am afraid of as frightened people."

Think of how anxiety plagues us in so many different ways today. We worry about terrorism, about immigration, about our health care system. We wonder if we are going to have enough money to make it to the grave.

What I love best about the Easter story is its assurance not only of God's victory over death, literally, as we think of it – the ceasing of life – breathing, stopping heart, those sorts of things, but victory over all other kinds of death. How many people live closed in, wrapped up in their lives, afraid of ever truly living?

Mary and Mary are still afraid when they leave the tomb, but the fear is being equaled now by the joy – “great joy,” we are told. As they run to tell the disciples, another seismic occurrence takes place. The risen Lord sees them along the way and greets them. At its root, the word “greetings” means “rejoice,” which is a shorthand way of saying, “Shall we laugh with delight and surprise? Shall we rejoice in God’s victory over death?” The women want to worship him, but the resurrected Christ is not interested in adoration. He wants action. He too says, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell. I’ll be in Galilee; there my brothers will see me.” He is not mad at the disciples, even though they had left him the week before. He calls them brothers now – no grudges left over (7) All of them now are family members, empowered along with the women, and given a mission to be agents of Easter in the real world - in the real world where Christ lived, and to which he has now returned to live with us forever.

Then comes of course the end of the story, as the disciples themselves encounter the risen Christ. Along with the women, they begin to live transformed lives. As someone wonderfully wise has said, “The proof of the resurrection is not a rolled-away stone. It is a carried-away church.”

“Something happened to turn the way of Jesus from a lost cause to a living gospel. Something happened to turn the disciples from fleeing cowards into flaming evangelists. Something happened to turn Jesus, who was a dead Messiah, into the living Christ,” of whose kingdom there shall be no end.(8)

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“I am,” said God. And so it came to pass that God’s own son came here to live with us, to die for us, and be raised from the dead for us.

This is my Easter message for you today, dear friends in Christ. Take with you the reassurance of Christ himself: “Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)
And so it is, this Easter morning. Alleluia!

(1) Barbara Brown Taylor, “Easter Sunday, 2006,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2008, p. 10.

(2) I wrote this wonderful idea down while researching this sermon, failed to annotate it, and now cannot find the source.

(3) Martin B. Copenhaver, “Laughter at Easter,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2007, p.15.

(4) Ibid, p. 16.

(5) Will Willimon, "Preaching Easter in Alabama," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2008, p. 6.

(6) Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, HarperCollins 2007, p.106.

(7) Agnes Norfleet, "Preaching the Easter Texts," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2008, p. 22.

(8) I found this quotation, with no citation, among my mother's papers when she died.