

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

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Easter Day
Year A

...they left the empty tomb with fear and great joy...

If only the Gospel writers had written the Easter story in the great epic tradition, filled with larger-than-life characters as metaphors for the forces of fortune and frailty that rule our lives; if only the strong roles were consistently strong, good examples for us; if only the bad guys were consistently weak and more like fairy tale monsters, we would know where we were with this story of Easter morning. We could domesticate it and analyze all its meanings and messages and make it into morality tales that would at least teach good conduct to our children.

But it doesn't matter whether we read it in Matthew or Mark or Luke or John, nobody tells the Resurrection story with epic heroes or epic villains. Easter morning in the Gospels is filled with very ordinary characters – like ourselves - characters who are anxious, uncertain, perplexed, distrustful. Everyone is afraid, from the most audacious of the disciples to the guards who know they are going to be in big trouble now. It's true that there always seems to be someone around telling them *not* to be afraid. But one thing is certain: absolutely no one in any of the Easter morning stories is bursting into *Alleluias*.

The writers take no pains at all to fluff themselves up or any of the rest of their band. Every one of them is described as afraid and confused. Every one had abandoned Jesus one way or another in his greatest time of need. The women, we are told in three of the Gospels, did stay at the cross; but then, they had very little to lose. Their position in the culture was so non-threatening they were practically invisible. The disciples in the Easter story - like all of us disciples here this morning - all wavered, lost faith, forgot what they had learned, and failed in their commitment and their understanding over and over again. Most of them ran back to their places of hiding and grieving as fast as they could get there, with nothing but an empty tomb and a few bizarre women's tales to fret about.

Yet, within days of Jesus' execution, the light of Easter morning begins to spring up - in their hideout, on the road to Emmaus, on a morning shore after a night of fishing... Within weeks, that Resurrection power burst into the flames of Pentecost that set that shivering, frightened, distrustful band of disciples on fire, free to tell their own Easter stories to anyone who would listen. In just a few years after that, those same, ordinary disciples would be traveling over 10,000 miles to invite everyone on earth to the feast of the Resurrection, to the earth-shattering Easter power that breaks all the rules, and is somehow at once God's protest against death and the feast of freedom from death.¹

How did this all happen? How did such a new beginning come out of such a disastrous end?² What was Easter morning? No one witnessed it. No one expected it. The best of the disciples were reluctant, frightened, and doubtful on that day and for many days after. No one has ever been able to explain it. Actually, no one in the New Testament ever even tried to explain it or prove it. They simply tried to describe what they were like before it and what they were like after it. That was all they could do.

Matthew uses some very particular images to describe the changes that began happening for him that day, and that never stopped changing him all the days of his life. He says that *suddenly there was a great earthquake* and that *an angel of the Lord*,

descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone. He says that the angel's appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow, and that the soldiers standing guard first *shook and then became like dead men.* These word pictures are unique to Matthew and they tell us something about what he saw - or what he came to see - with the eyes of his heart.³ Matthew was learning, I think, that the eyes of his head could only see the surface facts, but with the eyes of his heart he found he could begin to see the truths that are the deep truths, the meaning beneath the facts he could see with the eyes of his head. How could he ever find a way to tell the truths about that morning's facts, so that we might celebrate the Easter Feast of Freedom with him?

For Matthew, first of all, the truth was an earthquake, a great earthquake such as had never been known before, an earthquake that had opened his heart, an earthquake that could open the heart of all God's wounded world, an earthquake that could call life out of death. The voice of God calling to Jesus and Matthew and you and me: *Rise up! You are dead, but I call you to live!* The aftershocks would never finish adjusting to the effects of that quake in all the days of Matthew's telling of it. They have not finished to this day.

Next for Matthew, the truth was thunder and lightning. The thunder-angel descending from the heavens to roll back the great stone from the tomb, rolls and rolls of thunder from the future of Matthew's life, and the future of all our lives as the power of the Resurrection rolls back stone after stone after stone, from all the tombs that imprison us. Earthquakes and thunder shake our world. Lightning cracks open the heavens, making visible to us a light-energy that blinds us, stuns us, and reveals in a fleeting moment all that has been happening in the dark right in front of our unseeing eyes. Lightning's power frightens us *and* draws our hearts and minds to the surge of its power.

Only power like that could have set fire to those first shivering, suspicious, terrified disciples. Only Resurrection earthquake, thunder, and lightning can shake our world and crack open our cynicism and distrust and disbelief *with fear and great joy.*

Matthew says that the clothing of that thunder-and-lightning angel reflected light fabulously, the way a full moon shining on midnight snow can make you think it's sunrise. Only this was more than a sunrise. It was the dawning of Life itself, a new creation. The guards had to black out, literally, rather than open their hearts to the possibility, black out that light that could shed death, open tombs, shake us to our frail foundations, and empower us to live in the Kingdom of Easter.

We do that too, don't we? Close our eyes to black out the possibility of God's transforming presence in our midst, of Resurrection power calling us to live in the kingdom of Easter – free from our fear, free from any bondage that would hinder us from feasting, in that kingdom, on fruits of the Spirit – feasting every day and every hour on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness...⁴

Matthew is right. It does take something like an earthquake with thunder and lightning to open the tomb of our hearts. We have shut them up with such great, heavy stones of fear and distrust. But it is Easter morning and the door of our tomb *is* opened. Deep inside of us our God *has* rolled away the stone.

Come, *with fear and great joy!* Come, confident of the glory that shall be revealed!⁵ Come, let Resurrection curiosity and Resurrection trust dance on fear's grave! *Come,* says the angel, *see for yourselves!*

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless*

² Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*

³ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*

⁴ Galatians 5:22

⁵ from the Collect for Wednesday of Holy Week, *The Book of Common Prayer*