

“Rattling the World”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 20, 2014

Matthew 28: 1-10

An earthquake is not something we would choose to live through. They come without warning, they cause everything around us to shake and tremble, and major earthquakes often cause great loss of life and property. I have never lived through a significant earthquake, but to hear those who have experienced such an event it is not something they would wish to live through again. I have heard of several people who purposefully moved from places like California so that they might not experience an earthquake again. Just two days ago, we witnessed a significant earthquake occurring in Mexico, causing much damage and disruption.

“As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake.”

When you compare the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Matthew’s stands out in one interesting way. In Mark, Luke, and John, when Jesus breathes his last on the cross, the curtain in the temple is torn in two and the Centurion says, “Surely, this was the Son of God.” And when the women come to the tomb on the first day of the week, the stone has already been rolled away, and an angel greets them.

But in Matthew, there is something added to each of these scenes. In the description of Jesus’ death, Matthew says: “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. *The earth shook, and the rocks split . . .*” (27:50-51). This morning, we read that as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary approached the tomb on the first day of the week, that “*suddenly there was a great earthquake*; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it” (28:2). And as we mentioned last Sunday, the city of Jerusalem trembled when Jesus rode in on Palm Sunday. In Matthew, the Holy City shakes and trembles when the Messiah arrives, it takes an earthquake to rattle the earth when that Messiah dies, and it is an earthquake that announces his resurrection from the tomb on Easter morning.

That is a fairly appropriate image for Easter, considering where Matthew leaves us on Good Friday. At the end of chapter 27, we read that once Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus in the new tomb, he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb (27:60). And on the next day, at

the behest of the chief priests and Pharisees, Pilate had that great stone sealed and guarded, so there would be no chance of the disciples stealing the body away (27:65). On Good Friday, we are left with the image that a great, massive stone stands in the way between us and our Savior. A great and impenetrable barrier which the women worried would keep them from caring for their master. There seemed to be no way around it.

But a higher power intervened; the whole earth shook; and that impenetrable barrier was rolled to the side. Behind it was evidence of life, evidence of hope, proof that faith will win out over death. The resurrection of Jesus is an earthquake that rattles the world, and should shake us to our roots.

Two things strike me about what happens following the earthquake. The first is how the angel seeks to reassure the women that there is nothing to fear. "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said" (28:5). And later, when Jesus meets the women on their way to see the disciples, he seeks to comfort them, too: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (28:10). "Do not be afraid" echoes what was said at the beginning of Jesus' life. When Jesus was born, according to Luke the angels said to the shepherds in the fields, "Do not be afraid." For us humans, it is frightening to consider what is possible with God. And God seeks to reassure us that while our fears are real, those fears do not have to have the last word.

Second, amid all the rattling and fear which the women and disciples would have been experiencing that day, Jesus does not leave them rudderless or without direction. Cameron Murchison writes: *The even more important thing Matthew wants to say is that Jesus is going ahead of his disciples to Galilee, and that he will meet them there . .*

Galilee is not only the place where Jesus had promised to gather his scattered sheep again. It is also the place where his ministry, which embodied the dawning reign of God, had been lived out - where he called disciples, taught the crowds, healed the sick, appointed the Twelve, showed compassion on the suffering, offered the weary rest, spoke in parables, fed the multitudes, blessed the children, challenged a rich man, and taught about a Messiah who would suffer. The theological point of telling the disciples to meet him in Galilee is thus straightforward: the risen Jesus is to be expected in the places of his once and future ministry, in all those places of grace-full endeavor, where healing, feeding, teaching, and even suffering are undertaken in his company.

The encounter with the risen Jesus is not a self-contained, solitary spiritual experience. It is promised in the midst of the mission he

pursues even now, and invites us to join (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2010: 350*).

God does not rattle the world with Jesus' resurrection so that we might stay at the empty tomb and worship. As the angel says, "He is not here . . . he is going ahead of you." If we stay at the empty tomb; if we only show God our gratitude for his love on Sunday; if we believe that nothing has truly changed; if we live our life in fear and not hope; if we stay at the empty tomb, and refuse to "go ahead to Galilee," then we will miss the significance of this day, and we are not bearing witness to the one who "has been raised, as he said."

Our life and mission – as individual disciples and as the Body of Christ, the church – ought to respond to the command of Jesus, to go ahead: to Galilee, to your neighborhood, to your workplace, to the inner-city, to the poor and destitute, to the friend or stranger in need, to the uncomfortable places, to the rattled world – to go ahead, and there we will find the risen Lord. For Easter is not just about one miraculous day. It is a day that miraculously changes every day in which we are privileged and honored to serve our risen Lord.

Three years ago, when we were working on new ways to communicate our identity to our community, including revamping our website, the company we worked with led us in discussions about our brand. That's a secular term for stating our identity as a church, and then consistently and effectively communicating that identity to the larger community. Through discussions with a cross-section of our church, we came to develop the phrase: "Open. Caring. Community." We have lived with that descriptive phrase for three years, and over that time we have grown into it in various ways.

But what do those words truly mean, especially as we are called to future ministries where the risen Lord is waiting for us? When we say we are "open," how do we understand that in a deeper way when we think of what the opposite of "open" means? When we say we are "caring," what are the risks and rewards that come with being "caring?" When we say we are "community," how do we embody that word as both a community of believers, and engaging the community in which we are located? What does it mean to be an open, caring, community, in the light of Easter Sunday?

These are the questions we will be asking one another over the next three weeks as part of our "Visioning Our Future – Dinner and Discussions." The Session invites everyone associated with and connected to John Knox Presbyterian Church to these events on April 27, May 4, and May 9, from 6-8 p.m. We will delve into these three words, one per night, and ask questions that, through the Spirit's leading, will help us further discern who we are as a community of faithful believers and what we are called to do in the risen Christ's name in the future. Will you defer to others to engage in this important work,

or will you yourself be actively engaged in these discussions? Will you remain standing at the empty tomb, or will you go on ahead to the places where our risen Lord invites us to join him in mission and ministry?

This morning, we have the honor and joy of welcoming six young women and men into the life of our congregation. Joshua, Jen, Mariah, Zach, Kelsey and Courtney have been a part of the confirmation class this winter and spring, and, with their adult mentors, have delved deep into what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, both as individuals and as a member of the Body of Christ, the church.

If someone asks me, "What brings you the most joy in ministry?" I would respond each and every time, "Confirmation." For it is in walking alongside our youth and adults in faith formation that I feel renewed in not only my own personal faith, but also in the faith of the risen Christ who makes all things new. These six young men and women are no longer children of the church. They are not the church of the future. They are the church today. And I cannot wait to see how God will use each of them to "go on ahead" to the places of mission and service where our risen Lord waits for them in faithfulness.

"I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He is going ahead of you. There you will see him."

The tomb is empty. Our Lord has gone ahead. Let us go and meet him, bearing witness in our worship, our service, and our daily lives, that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Thanks be to God. Amen.