

“There is an old story of a farmer who said lightning struck an old shed and thus saved him the trouble of tearing it down, and rain washed off his car and saved him that chore too. When asked what he was doing now, he replied, ‘Waiting for an earthquake to shake the potatoes out of the ground.’<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know about you, but earthquakes are one of the things I fear the most. ... Tornados come in a close second, but at least you get some warning with those. But, earthquakes ... they just happen and there is nowhere you can go to escape their impact.

Just look at the earthquake we experience this morning. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to Jesus’ tomb, early in the morning. Like we often do, they come to the graveside of the one they love ... not completely sure what they will do there, but wanting some way to express their grief and loss, wanting to say good-bye and tend to Jesus, as they did when he was with them.

As they approach, the earth begins to shake under their feet and not only that, but an angel descends and rolls the stone away from the tomb ... this huge, heavy stone rolls back and the ground is shaking and the angel flashes brightly before their eyes ... and those big, tough guards faint dead away. ... Everything changes in that moment. It is why we are here today. We echo the proclamation of the angel, “The crucified One is not here. He is risen! Alleluia!” But, what really changes with this earthquake?

Bob Reeves reflected yesterday, in the Values section of the Journal Star,<sup>2</sup> that with the economic downturn, five years of the Iraq war with no end in sight, and the crisis threatening in our environment ... that maybe, the timing of an early Easter is exactly what we needed. “We all need hope.” We all need change, a new beginning.

These are the buzz words of the year: hope and change. But, where does real change come from?

As I was pondering the Easter story this year, something dawned on me. When you look at Jesus’ whole story and Jesus’ relationship with the disciples, nothing changed. ... Let me explain. He was alive, walking with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Poovey, W.A., *The Prayer He Taught* quoted in *Illustrations Unlimited*, edited by James Hewitt. pg 391.

<sup>2</sup> “Easter reminds faithful to be hopeful even in times of doubt” (Saturday, March 22, 2008, Section D)

disciples, teaching them, and bringing new life wherever he went, ... before the earthquake and after the earthquake. What he taught the disciples ... about how God acts and what the Messiah must do (live, suffer, die, and rise) ... he told them before and lived for them after. While he was with them, he gave them tools to go out and share this good news with others, heal the sick, and unite all, in the promises of God ... before and after the earthquake. Who Jesus is ... with and for the disciples, before and after the earthquake is the same. So, what changed?

What moved Peter from being a dutiful follower to being a dynamic leader? What transformed his understanding of the Messiah from being a military victor, to a life-transforming servant of all? ... Think about Peter, before the earthquake, one minute he was boldly confessing Jesus as Lord and the next, he is protesting and trying to stop Jesus from taking the path of the cross. One minute he was saying that he would fight to the end, ... by Jesus' side, and the next, ... he was denying Jesus three times, ... then running off into the darkness, weeping and hiding with the rest of the disciples, completely unsure about what to do next.

But, after the earthquake ... Peter has all the same information, same promise, and Jesus with him, through the power of the Holy Spirit, yet he is preaching a sermon that shakes the world of those around him. Because of Jesus, he knows that God shows no favoritism ... that the disciples were chosen to be witnesses of this gift of grace, but it wasn't an exclusive message. Instead, it was given so all would know – “that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again— he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.” (The Message, Eugene Peterson) And Cornelius, an outsider, a Gentile ... someone, who Peter once thought was unworthy of this good news, becomes a brother in Christ and begins sharing this good news with his family and friends. Peter is not the same.

So, maybe you are beginning to see that the question is not, ... ‘What has changed?’ but, ... ‘Who has changed?’ ... so, now we need wonder a bit about, how this earthquake changes the followers' vision from fear to joy?

As I said before, earthquakes are one of my greatest fears. It is part of the reason why I have chosen to live in states close to the center of the United States, instead of say ... San Francisco. Although, someone recently told me that one of the biggest seismic zones sits not too far from here, near New Madrid, Missouri. So, I did some research and Wikipedia informed me that we have a 90% chance of experiencing a 6.0 or greater earthquake, between now and 2040. Even if we are on the far edge of its impact, this knowledge does

not make me very happy. ... I have to wonder how God thought shaking everyone's world was going to help move people from fear to faith?

Then, I noticed<sup>3</sup> something else about what this Easter earthquake does. We know this story well. In the other three Gospels, the stone is already rolled back ... before the women arrive. But, Matthew helps us see something that we might just assume, in the other tellings. Think about it. When we consider the stone, we think of it being the barrier that holds Jesus inside. For us, the stone being rolled back, symbolizes the release of our risen Lord into the world ... from death into life.

But, with Matthew's telling, we discover the stone being rolled away serves another purpose. The women arrive, the ground starts to shake, the angel rolls back the stone and declares, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." Jesus is not there. He has already been raised. "The stone isn't rolled away to let him OUT. The stone is rolled away to let us IN."<sup>4</sup>

Come and see where he lay. Come and see death could not hold him. Come and see all that you fear: ... earthquakes, failure, not having enough, not being perfect, illness, old age, not being liked or accepted, ... people who are different than you, addiction, not being strong enough, an uncertain future, and even death. ... Come and see what God does, in the midst of all of these and more, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Nothing can stop or separate you from the love of God. See, Jesus suffered under the weight of sin, faced the oppressor's questioning, imprisonment, and torture; he even died on the cross for you. ... He faced all that you believe gets in the way of your living; ... all the things you think have power over your life, ... all the things you think are impossible to overcome, ... all the things that roll the stone shut on your past, present, and future, ... all the things you grieve and run from and fear. He took them into the tomb with him.

And now the earth is shaking. And a messenger of the Lord is proclaiming to you that the stone is rolled away. Come in and see that the tomb is empty. Jesus has destroyed the power of sin, fear, and death in your lives. He has removed the barriers and extends an invitation to come and dwell with Him, saying to you, "Do not be afraid for I am with you."

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>, Easter 2008

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

What has changed? For the women, it didn't happen all at once. They got up and ran with fear and joy from all they heard and saw. They ran back into a world that hadn't changed. The guards and priests were still plotting about how they could protect the people from the Romans and figure out how to keep this story of Jesus from spreading. The same threats, temptations, and daily work would make demands on their lives, yet ...

With joy replacing sorrow and hope replacing fear ... and the promise of encountering Jesus as you go about your daily lives, ... now this changes things. No, I should say this changes you. ... And the world anticipates the good news you bring, now that your world has been shaken and the stone has been rolled away.

Let us pray, Risen Christ, so much of our lives tell us to be afraid, to give up, and that nothing we do, really makes a difference. On this Easter morn, invite us into the tomb again and help us see what is possible with you and your word of hope and healing. Send us with the women and disciples, as messengers of this gift of life, today and everyday. Alleluia. Amen.