

“Quaking”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28:1-10
April 21, 2019 - Easter Sunday

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed!

Christ is risen, and Matthew wants to make sure you know and so he gives you the summer blockbuster, Marvel Cinematic Universe resurrection account. He's unique among the Gospel writers in including an earthquake, an angel descending to roll away the stone, and catatonic guards on Easter morn.

Matthew's special effects actually go back to the crucifixion. When Jesus takes his last breath, the curtain in the temple is torn in half, and the earth shakes, splitting rocks and opening up tombs so that the bodies of saints are released into the city.

The earth is shaken. Creation quakes. Everything we ever knew to be straightforward and reliable is suddenly rumbling.

We know that the dead stay dead and life in the empire will crush you unless you keep your head down and God stays in the boxes we build and these women who have faithfully kept vigil while the body was in state custody will soon return to their community and need to find a way to get on with their lives. We know that it is finished.

But the earth shakes and these women have an experience the likes of which they had only heard about in scripture: an angel of the Lord speaking those most angelic words: “Do not be afraid.” And then, as they go from the tomb, they are met...

And can you imagine meeting the one you've loved so dearly, the one who loved you and your merry band of weirdos, the one who seemed to know more about love than anyone you'd ever met, the one whom you have been grieving? Beloved, I know you can imagine it. I know you have thought about it, having one you have lost stand close enough that you could take hold of their feet and see their eyes looking back at you in love.

This all must have shaken them. We play and sing strong, triumphant notes on Easter, as we should But if your voice cracks a time or two or one of your notes trembles, know that you are not alone.

Between the angel and Jesus each saying, “Do not be afraid,” Matthew tells us:

“So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.”

With fear and great joy.

Thanks be to God for this unexpected pairing of reactions. Just a few months ago, on that other most happy of Christian holy days, we read:

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were

sore afraid. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

To the person who hasn't lived at all, fear and joy might seem like oil and water. But those who move about his earth know well this strange emotional emulsion.

The two of you are alone. One of you may be down on one knee. The question is asked and — if you have any sense at all — you both know what the answer will be. You expected this. You planned for it. And yet, you quake. You are happy. Your stomach is somersaulting. It is exactly what you hoped for, and you are sore afraid.

This wonderful kid — this niece, this grandson, this child, this cute little bug you let into your heart — this kid catches you short with an observation or a question or a plea that lets you know they are trading in their kid shoes for growing-up shoes. You hoped for this. The world will be just a hair better because of it. It is terrifying.

You get the call and you keep your composure on the phone — you got the job! Or your project was approved! Your grant is funded! Your business idea is going to be a reality!

They are unavoidable, these seismic shifts that bring such over-the-top good news. The dream (the prayer) is now a reality. You can't even rewind to “before” once you have encountered it. There is only “after.” Everything will be different now. Joy!

Everything will be different now. Fear! When the world opens before you, it can be daunting to realize that you actually have to do something about it. You have to do this relationship in a different way. You have to do the work you've been asking to do. You have to tend to and nurture your creation. Your body goes into overdrive. Your face flushes and you smile and your vision blurs with tears of... Your heart pounds and your tummy churns and you're suddenly acutely aware that you have earlobes.

In these trembling moments of fear and joy, we get a whiff of resurrection. An amuse-bouche of Easter. It's muscle memory that connects to Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the whole community of first believers.

Of course it was both fear and joy. They knew now that the previous few years was not a drill. God was actually up to something here. Jesus had told the truth about God and about himself and if he'd told the truth about that then he must have told the truth about grace and hunger and peace and blessing and justice. He must have told the truth about us — that we are salt and light and only we stand in the way of God's reign. And so we must continue to follow him, because it is emphatically not finished. Christ is risen! In a disorienting, resurrection world, we must follow him. He will continue to demand much of us. He will put us in opposition to empire. He told the truth. With fear and great joy, the church begins to tell this good news. And the earth quakes, its landscape changing forever.

Resurrection brings fear with the joy as we stand in awe of what has been done for us, in awe of what has been entrusted to us, in awe of what we will need to do with such love.

Resurrection works the other way as well — it brings joy with fear to those other moments — the ones that those who move about this earth know in their bones and sinew. When the doctor steels herself before opening her mouth and then a new, disorienting reality is spoken. When the unimaginable

breaks your brain because you can't imagine it, but it is nevertheless visible to your eyes. When death is not a sweet, end-of-day dirge, but a mid-morning crash of shattered crystals. When churches burn in Paris and in Louisiana. When explosions rumble on Easter morning in Sri Lanka. When the world feels like it's just a giant, trembling ball of fear and anxiety and anger. When we simply want to take our toys and go home and scream into a pillow, resurrection is there with its persistent joy.

Resurrection does not show up to make everything okay. It doesn't show up to make you or your situation perfect. It does not avoid your fear, your mess, your despair. It shows up, wounded, dusty, before you've had a drop of coffee. It shows up having literally died. It shows up with the salt of suffering on its lip.

Resurrection does not arrive to make you feel better. It arrives to make you know you are beloved. Resurrection brings joy to fear in someone who loves you enough to listen to your most ramble-y ranting and who will gently wipe your grown-up nose for you. Your guts are quaking, but another stands with you, poking your elbow and making quiet, inappropriate jokes — the kind of jokes only one who has seen death is allowed to make.

God has this joke for death prepared from the beginning, when there was the Word and the light that will not be overcome and God saw that it was good.

If we are willing to follow this God...

this God who would start a new thing in the Redneck Riviera of the Roman Empire and be preposterous enough to start even that as a baby...

and who would tear open the skies to pronounce love...

and who would come all that way to tell us that we are, each of us, treasured...

and that we are, each of us, responsible for the well-being of the others...

and who would make new promises in water and bread and cup...

and who would see it through to the end, and would suffer and die...

If we are willing to follow this God of resurrection,

we will live as a people who tremble, tremble, tremble with great joy,

knowing that there are dragons and shadows but that we are not alone

and that our God takes delight in surprising us and upending everything we thought we knew.

Amen.