

The Resurrection of our Lord + April 12, 2020

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Matthew's version of the Easter story teems with drama. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead causes an earthquake. It causes the earth to shake. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb where Jesus' body lay and suddenly the earth shakes and with that an angel appears. This frightens the guards of the tomb so much that they faint, pass out, and they appear to be dead.

And the angel, in the midst of this shake up, says this to the women at the tomb: "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid. Jesus is risen and has gone before you just as he said.

I'm now reading a book called *This is Chance*. It's a true story about the day the earth shook on Good Friday, 1964. By all accounts, it was the largest earthquake on the North American continent. The epicenter of this crisis was Anchorage, Alaska. The city of Anchorage was devastated. Buildings were destroyed. The earth cracked open and swallowed up cars. Suddenly, life was upended.

The protagonist in the story is a journalist named Genie Chance. She finds herself reporting what's happening but also serving as a kind solvent helping pull the town together. I'm still working on the book, but as the story unfolds I get the senses that people came together in acts of love and mercy. Naturally, people were frightened, felt helpless and desolate. Yet, in the midst of the devastation, the people rallied and it seems that on that Easter weekend in 1964, a blanket of mercy covered the town of Anchorage where people were saying to one another, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid.

Now, it's Easter 2020 and though we haven't had an earthquake, we've certainly witnessed the world being shaken up. This pandemic affects, not merely a continent or a city, but all continents and all cities everywhere. We're in a global crisis. People are afraid. We do feel a large degree of uncertainty and helplessness.

Still, the Easter message will not be quelled. At the tomb, the angel says to the women, "do not be afraid."

I am convinced on this day and in all our days that we can only hear that message through the promises of God and to hear it as an assurance to us that comes from deep within the heart of God.

The message isn't merely spoken by God and God's messengers, it is enacted. The message is embodied and enacted through love. The message, "Do not be afraid" becomes tangible when love is given and received.

One of the rituals I miss about this Holy Week is the foot washing of Maundy Thursday. Talk about vulnerable act, a humble act, a moment when all pretenses are washed away where there is no such thing about better or best or worse. No such thing as greater or lesser but a vivid and powerful demonstration of the call of all people to embrace humility. Here we see the majesty of God in Jesus, the Lord, who kneels to wash the feet of his followers. The one

who comes to save us leads us by being a servant. Kneeling to wash feet, Jesus demonstrates God's love and evokes the servant lifestyle that is commanded of us as disciples. A love this rich and powerful pries us away from the grip of fear.

Do not be afraid. These are hopeful words, but they are not to be confused with a kind of phony optimism. Life is really hard these days. Some of you know and love people who've been infected or died from the COVID-19 virus. The awful virus has pervaded the planet. We acknowledge it and we acknowledge our real fear and trepidation and sadness. It doesn't seem like everything will be better, at least in the short-term. What I have seen is the miracle of love breaking out in and among and through us. I think that puts our real fear into perspective, where we don't give it as much power. When we are mobilized by fear we find ourselves blaming, scapegoating, behaving territorially but when the love of God casts out fear, I notice how those sorts of behaviors meet away and we are changed.

I've noticed this in and through the lives of PRLC folks ...

- You've been actively keeping in touch with each other and some of you have especially been in touch with folks who are lonely.
- You've been actively praying for each other and the world.
- You've been working in the food bank to hand out love to hungry neighbors
- You've been sending money to outreach and to other places seeking to help those who are in trouble or have fallen ill.
- You've been making masks and given them away to folks
- You've been writing letters and cards
- You've been actively reaching out, still, to newcomers – meeting via Zoom or Skype and I don't say this lightly, but I do really mean it, I've seen lives change
- You've been writing reflections and doing videography to help make Lent and Holy Week meaningful
- You've been calling your friends and playing or singing their favorite hymns
- You've been laboring in your various vocations and some of you very intensely these days as health care workers, nurses, doctors, administrators

You see, even in deathly times, love changes us and we experience life and newness.

It is a force more powerful than an earthquake.

As the beloved hymns says: "Love lives again that with the dead has been. Love is come again like wheat arising green,"

When we hear that Easter caused an earthquake, the good news is this - a seismic shift has occurred in the world. Jesus' resurrection affects all creation and, in fact, the entire cosmos.

Along with you, I am missing the Easter Vigil this year. One of the things I really love about the Vigil is the Easter Proclamation, known as the Exsultet. It's sung after we gather into the worship space from the new fire with our candles lighted. The Exsultet praises the light of Christ conveyed through the new Paschal Candle and in this hymn, we are reminded that Easter

is indeed cosmic and that all of creation is offering praise and worship.

All the church, all the heavenly choirs of angels, all the apostles and all the faithful departed, all creatures, all earth and sea, and that praise spills over into the great 50 days of Easter where in the preface in the prayer of thanksgiving at the table, we join our praises with Mary Magdalene and Peter and all the witness of the resurrection; with earth and sea and all their creatures, joining in a hymn that is sung from every corner of the world.

All heaven and earth rejoice on this day for the glory of God has filled all the world.

Just when we thought for sure that the world had fallen for good, God raises Jesus from the dead and because of that, everything has changed.

God is saying to you and me and all creatures everywhere: "Do not be afraid."

When the women leave the tomb as the angel instructed them, they meet Jesus and fall down to worship him and Jesus repeats the angel's words: "Do not be afraid."

The antidote to fear is love and the love of God changes us. It changes all things.

More than once, I've heard people say that this pandemic will change us. It may change the way we operate, the way we govern, the way we navigate our lives and communities.

No doubt. Things like earthquakes and pandemic change us.

Still, more powerful than all of that is the Resurrection of Jesus that shook the world long ago and continues to do so. No one can explain this mystery of Easter but you and I are sure witnesses of it and we've come to know and trust and believe that the resurrection of Jesus changes lives and changes the world still.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!