

The End of the World as We Know It
Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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Many years ago, when I lived in the South, there were rumors – started by some scientists’ calculations – that a rare earthquake was about to hit our region. Like thousands of other people, I immediately called my insurance agent to try to buy earthquake insurance. But, of course, the insurance company had suspended sales of those policies as soon as the rumor started. The appointed time for the Great Southern Earthquake came and went, and I am thankful to tell you that the quake itself never happened. So, I have never been in an earthquake. Have you? But I know people who have lived in California when major quakes came, and the stories they tell give a sense of how very disorienting a big earthquake is, how being in an earthquake can change you profoundly.

I once rented a house from a woman named Sue, who was in law school in California. Sue was pregnant at the time – about 8 months along and very cumbersome. One day, she was studying in the library when an earthquake hit. She was sitting at a big, heavy, oak desk, so she crawled under it for cover, into the tiny knee hole. In her advanced pregnant state, she totally filled up the space under the desk. Her mind was flashing from one possibility to another – would the roof collapse above her or the floor fall away beneath her? – and she kept scrunching her big body first this way and then that in that tiny space, in an effort to protect her unborn child from whichever way flying or falling objects seemed to her confused mind to be most likely to come. She turned herself over and around so many times in those few minutes that by the time the quake was over, she hardly knew up from down anymore. The earthquake literally dis-oriented her. It wasn’t an experience she could just let go. She said it stayed with her, profoundly unsettling her sense of safety. The plans she had for lunch, and for her future, just didn’t matter anymore. So much so that she decided immediately to leave law school and head her life in a different direction altogether.

Being in an earthquake will shake the very foundation of how you understand yourself, how you understand the world around you. After a major earthquake, everything is different. You can’t go back.

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Our gospel text today is the Easter story from Matthew, which begins with an earthquake. Each of the four gospels gives us a slightly different version of that morning. In Mark, the earliest gospel, the women find the empty tomb and run away in fright, resolved not to tell anyone what they have seen. In Luke, the women find the empty tomb and run to tell the disciples, who come to see for themselves and go away amazed. And in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb and goes to tell the disciples. Peter and John race to the tomb and realize what has happened – not a grave robbery, but a resurrection. Then – amazing to me – they just go home. Really? I agree with Will Willemon, who writes,

Go back home? ... A man is raised from the dead and you can’t cancel lunch? How dumb are these disciples?

[Actually, he says, they were not dumb, but just] people like us ... who like to believe that you can have resurrection and still have the world as it was yesterday. We want to have Easter and still have our world un-rocked by resurrection.

In so many ways, Good Friday – even with its crucifixion – is easier to accept than Easter morning. We understand Good Friday because we know how things are in this world. We are realists. By the end of Good Friday, the disciples were realists, too, even if they had let their hearts get ahead of their heads for a while. But when Jesus was buried, all their dreams died, and they returned to the real world, where facts are facts, and things are what they are, and bad guys often win, and life must go on, until it doesn't anymore.

In a sense, the crucifixion lets the disciples off the hook, because Jesus' ministry was beginning to ask hard things of them – to give whatever they had to the poor, to become instruments of healing, to speak truth to power – all godly and dangerous acts. After the crucifixion, they are off the hook, back to their old lives, no more risk for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the resurrection grabs them back again. It shakes the disciples' world more than the crucifixion could ever do. It is Easter morning that is the end of the world as they know it. Jesus isn't safely dead and buried, he is on the loose again in the world! Down is up and up is down. And each of Jesus' followers is back on the hook – to give to the poor in a world where there will always be poverty, to be an instrument of the healing and peace that are so desperately needed, responsible once again for speaking truth to power in a world where there is so much power and so great a risk in telling the truth.

No matter what you have planned for Easter dinner, Matthew wants us to know that we can't just go home and have lunch. Or rather, we can't go back to our lives as though nothing were different. This day, this resurrection, should make us wonder, too, which way is up. This day, this resurrection, calls us back to the responsibility of discipleship, whether we are ready for it or not.

No one sells insurance to protect us against this earthquake. We can't keep God from breaking into our world because it has already happened. We can't keep life from seeping in around the edges of death. We can't keep hope from blooming where there was none before. We can't push back the joy of Christ's triumph. And, try as we might, we can't keep this story from rumbling through our lives and making claims on us.

This is the end of the world as we know it. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Amen