

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Rev. Susan B. Rice

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

“The Earth Shook”

Matthew 28:1-10

John’s account of the resurrections says that they got to the tomb on Easter morning, and it was empty. Then, they went back home. Went back home? Reminds you of the two disciples in Luke on the way to Emmaus. “Some women told us that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but we had already planned to have supper over in Emmaus, so we couldn’t change our reservations.”

A man is raised from the dead and you can’t cancel lunch? How dumb are these disciples, I ask you?

If you listen to Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar you get even a different view point. Marcus thinks the disciples had an “experience.” They said, “Wasn’t it great being with Jesus before they killed him? You remember those great stories he told? The lectures, er, sermons? Just thinking about it makes him seem almost still here. Yep, he is still here. Let’s all close our eyes and believe real hard that he’s still here. Okay?”

Hey, Jesus Seminar, the disciples weren’t that creative! These were not imaginative minds we’re dealing with here. They were the sort of people who could see an empty tomb and not let it spoil lunch. You don’t get an idea like the bodily resurrection of Jesus out of people with brains like Simon Peter’s. In short, the disciples were people like us. People like us are the sort of folk who like to believe that you can still have resurrections and still have the world as it was yesterday. We want to have Easter and still have our world unrocked and unchanged by resurrection. We are amazingly well adjusted to the same old world.

I think that’s why Matthew says that when there was Easter, the whole earth shook. Luke does Easter as a meal on Sunday evening with the risen Christ. John has resurrected Jesus’ encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden. But Matthew? Easter is an earthquake with doors shaken off tombs and dead people walking the streets, the stone rolled away by the ruckus and an imprudent angel sitting on it.

I’ve been in an earthquake, not a big one, but enough to know I don’t want to be in anything bigger. I was in Guatemala—we were leaving the next morning so we were in Coatepeque on the third floor of a three story hotel. I remember the first jolt and then this shaking that seemed to go on forever—a picture fell off the wall and you could hear all the fixtures in the tiny bathroom clinking together. Of course, I jump up and head out the door because my son was in another room down the hall and he, of course was my first thought. To my amazement others are standing out in the hall and you can hear people going about their business in the street below. The shaking stopped and people returned quietly to whatever it was they were doing. It wasn’t a big deal to them. Later I learned it wasn’t really an earthquake at all, but what is called aftershocks. There had been a real earthquake not long before we had arrived—but the aftershocks and the tremors can continue for days and even weeks. Regardless to me—if that wasn’t an earthquake, I sure don’t ever want to be in a real earthquake. Matthew says Easter is an earthquake that shook the whole world—not just Coatepeque, but the whole world!

We modern types try to “explain” the resurrection. Some say that Jesus was in a deep, drugged coma and woke up. Others say the disciples got all worked up in their grief and just fantasized the whole thing.

You can’t *explain* resurrection. Resurrection explains us. The truth of Jesus tells on the faces of the befuddled disciples who witnessed it. Not one of them expected or for that matter wanted Easter. Death, defeat, while regrettable, are utterly explainable.

It had been a good campaign while it lasted. But we didn’t get him elected Messiah. Death has the last word. We had hoped, but you’ve got to face facts. After all, I’m sure you have lunch reservations and we can’t let a little thing like resurrection interrupt that. Face the facts. The world is in the tight death-grip of “the facts.” All that lives, dies. The good get it in the end. Face facts. It may be a rather somber world, but it is our world where things stay tied down and what dies stays that way. And there are few surprises. This is us and we like it. But, it’s not about us.

But Easter is about God. It is not about the resuscitation of a dead body. That’s resuscitation, not resurrection. It’s not about the immortality of the soul, some divine spark that endures after the end. That’s Plato, not Jesus. It’s about God, not God as an empathetic but ineffective friend, or some inner experience, but God who creates a way when there was no way, a God who makes war on evil until evil is undone, a God who raises dead Jesus just to show us who’s in charge here.

I don’t know this for sure but I think the Easter earthquake angel perched on the rock rolled from the tomb was the same angel who back in Matthew 1 (vv8-25), shook Joseph awake one night with the news that his fiancée was pregnant. (Talk about an earth-quake!) See my point? God did on Easter in invading the tomb what God did on Christmas in a virgin’s womb. Made a way when there was no way. Took charge. The same angel who was sent to tell Joseph, “name that baby Emmanuel, God with us,” was the same angel who told the women, “Don’t be afraid. He isn’t here. He’s been raised.” “Little God with Us” grew up, got crucified, made the earth shake, and is on the move to take back the world. On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all God could to the world. And the earth shook.

You don’t explain that. You witness it. That’s why the risen Christ appeared first to his own disciples. They had heard him teach, seen him heal, watched as he loved the poor and attacked the rich, watched him be arrested by the soldiers, tried by the judge, and crucified.

Why would Jesus come back first to his disciples? Because they were the ones able to recognize that this risen Lord was none other than the crucified Jesus. Crucifixion wasn’t just an unfortunate mistake in the Roman legal system, the first century Judean equivalent of the O.J. Simpson fiasco. Crucifixion was the inevitable, predictable result of saying the things Jesus said, and doing the things Jesus did, and being the Savior Jesus was. This is what the world always does to people who threaten the world.
Face the facts.

But on Easter God inserted a new fact. God took the cruel cross and made it the means of triumph. God—the same Creator who made light from darkness, a world from void—took the worst we could do – all our death dealing doings – and led them out toward life. And the earth shook.

A new world was offered to us. Jesus came back to forgive the very disciples who had forsaken him. The world is about forgiveness, as it turns out, not vengeance. And the earth shook.

Jesus picked up a piece of bread and ate it and you could see the nail prints in his hands. The world is about life, as it turns out, not death. And the earth shook.

The women came out to the cemetery to write one more chapter in the long sad story of death's ascendance, one more episode of how the good always get it in the end. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper of resignation at death's dark victory.

And then the earth heaved, an angel appeared, the stone was rolled away, Caesar's soldiers shook. The angel plopped himself down on the stone in one final act of impudent defiance of death and said to the women, "Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus? He isn't here."

Then that angel turned to the soldiers and said, "Be afraid." Everything your world is built on is being shaken." Nobody went back the same.