

Easter A 2017, April 16, 2017, Matthew 28:1-10, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Each biblical account of the resurrection of Jesus provides the same basic details. Early in the morning after the Sabbath women go to the tomb in order to give Jesus a proper burial. As they arrive they find the tomb has been opened. In a few of the gospels an angel appears to the women reporting that Jesus is not here, but has risen from the dead. The reaction is universal and easily understood. Fear. Amazement. Joy. In all the gospels the women become the first to know Jesus is raised and the first to proclaim to others the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. They are the church's first evangelists, sent to give witness to this great and momentous event.

But there are some differences. Only in Matthew's gospel, which we just heard, does an angel roll the stone away, causing a great earthquake. This tomb-rending earthquake parallels the veil-rending earthquake in the Temple when Jesus dies on the cross, also unique to Matthew. The tomb's guards, placed there to prevent theft of the body, faint away in paralyzing terror.

It turns out there's a little known ancient manuscript that includes some of the conversation of these two guards after they regained consciousness. Their names were Denarios and Bucina. As they slowly came out of their slumber they shook their heads to try to wake up. They got up and looked into the now empty tomb. Denarios then turned to Bucina and said, "Well, I guess the only thing that's certain now is taxes."

I'm not so sure the women were so certain, however. In just about all of the accounts of the resurrection everyone is fearful and terror stricken. The angel says to the women, "Do not be afraid." Jesus, when he appears to them later on also says, "Do not be afraid." So momentous, so terrifying and outside their experience, a man rising from the dead could hardly be believed, let alone something of which to be certain.

Yet they go. They go to tell the disciples "with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples." I just love that phrase. Fear and joy. And they ran. Unable to contain themselves, giddy with excitement, terrified at the implications, they had to tell. They couldn't hold it in. Good News is always news that needs to be told. It can't be held back. It mustn't be held back. Why is it, then, that we, who are the hearers of this news, hold it in? Why aren't we shouting it from the roof tops, rushing to our friends and families, "haven't you heard? The most wonderful thing has happened!"

Maybe it's because we don't hear it as wonderful. Maybe it's not true. Clearly the world seems to go on its old, warring, deceitful, callous ways. If Jesus is raised from the dead, and that means everything is different, then why aren't things so different? Maybe we should just pack it in, and admit that it doesn't really make that much difference after all.

I'll admit there are days when I feel that way. I'd appreciate a good tomb-opening earthquake, complete with terror-inducing angelic messenger. Some unmistakable sign from heaven, and all that. Maybe after some good old-fashioned fear it would be easier to believe in the unlikely message that this man, so brutally executed, is risen from the dead, and that his rising does change everything.

But what if that earthquake was just meant for the women, and not for us? What if the angel, and the guards quaking half-dead, the stone rolled away aren't ours, but were only for them? What do we have? What belongs to us?

Simply the words. "He has been raised from the dead. Go and tell the others." And so it is. From one person to another. From one generation to another. He has been raised. It's not for us to receive faith at the hand of dramatic seismic events, or cosmic messengers from heaven. We receive our faith simply, humbly. On a mother's or grandmother's knee. In a Sunday School class or singing in a choir. From opening a bible and reading words that are God's Word. From one friend telling another how God has helped and strengthened in a time of need. In a font of water as God's promises are poured out. On a table set with bread and wine and words of love and forgiveness are spoken, "this is my body, this is my blood, shed for you." All of these are ways we hear, again and again, Jesus is raised from the dead. And that changes everything.

It may seem simple. It may not seem like much. But Jesus risen is everything, and his rising now makes everything complete. Amen.