

Easter Sunday Message – April 12, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10

Sunday, April 15, 2018. It was a week after Easter and the weather was absolutely terrible. There had been freezing rain during the night and there was the threat of more to come. Reluctantly the Sessions made the decision to cancel the worship services that morning and I remember thinking to myself: “Thank goodness this wasn’t last Sunday! What would we have ever done? Would we have tried to worship despite the threat to life and limb? Would we have put the Easter service off for a week or even let it go altogether?” To me it was entirely inconceivable that we would not come together as a community of faith to worship on the day which, with all due respect to Christmas, is the high point of the Christian calendar. But that was then and this is now.

I must confess that I find it both strange and sad that we cannot join together as a church family to celebrate Easter this year. Of course we can still celebrate it on our own in different ways by such as reading the gospel accounts of the resurrection, listening to some of the great Easter music or perhaps watching a service on TV or over the internet. Even so, it just isn’t the same. But while we cannot come together, we can and should remember the great promises of Easter. I like the way a Facebook post put it. The top part of the post depicted an empty church on Easter Sunday morning. The caption read: “The church is empty”. Beneath this was a picture of the empty tomb with the caption: “The tomb is empty”. The message was simple enough; the churches may be empty this Easter Sunday but what really matters is that the tomb was empty too.

The lectionary suggests using one of two gospel lessons this Easter Sunday. One is John’s account of the resurrection and the other is Matthew’s. John’s account is by far the better known and, I would say, most beloved and it is not hard to see why; it seems so reverent and spiritual. Matthew’s account on the other hand almost sounds like it could be taken from a movie script.

“After the Sabbath, at dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothes were as white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men”.

There was an earthquake on that first Easter morning? This is not how we usually envision it, and then when we remember what Matthew wrote earlier in his gospel about what happened when Jesus died and was raised?

“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and tombs broke open. The bodies of the holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the city and appeared to many people”.

An earthquake on both the Friday afternoon and the Sunday morning with the dead being raised back to life and then walking the streets after Jesus’ resurrection? This might well sound more like a scene from a horror movie than the gospel! Inevitably the scholars have had a field day trying to understand this. On the one hand there are those who say that Matthew recorded what really happened; there were two earthquakes and the dead did walk the city streets. On the other hand, there are those who say that Matthew’s resurrection account is to be understood symbolically rather than literally, that what Matthew was trying to do was convey the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. That quite simply is that there is a life after death and that because of Jesus’ resurrection, life and the world itself would never be the same again, that there had been an earthquake as if it were.

More often than not when we think of Easter, we tend to think of it in terms of our own mortality; like Christ we shall die yet like Christ we too shall live. This is certainly the message of so much of the music we love to sing and listen to on Easter morning. The words of Charles Wesley’s great hymn come to mind:

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal;

Christ hath burst the gates of hell;
Death in vain forbids His rise;
Christ hath opened Paradise.
Lives again our glorious King:
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Once He died our souls to save;
Where thy victory, O grave?

The next verse goes on to say:

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Following our exalted Head;
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

This is the first great promise of Easter and the one that we usually focus on; that death is not the end but rather, a new beginning. This is what Matthew was trying to convey when he said that the dead were raised and walked the city streets that morning. And as for the earthquakes? They are full of meaning too.

When Jesus died it appeared that all was lost and that another good man had fallen victim to the powers of sin, hate and darkness. It appeared as if hate was stronger than love and that evil was stronger than good. And if this was Jesus' fate, then why should anyone ever bother trying to be good, loving, forgiving and compassionate? What is the point?

Jesus' resurrection answers that; it does because it was the validation of who he claimed to be and all that he lived, taught and died for. The resurrection was, as if it were, an earthquake challenging the world and its values and this is something that we need to remember.

We are of course living through an unprecedented crisis; there is widespread fear with so many businesses shut down and people out of work. There are those who feel lost and isolated, cut off from family and

friends because of the very real need to keep our physical distance from one another. To that we can add the very real fear of what might happen if we, a loved one or friend contracts the virus. And of course there are those who have caught it with all that that may mean. Truly in some ways we may feel as if we are oppressed by the forces of fear, evil and darkness but even so, we can have hope.

The great promise of Easter is that God, the one who lived, died and was raised for us is in charge, now and forever. The resurrection reminds us that love is stronger than hate, that good is stronger than evil and that life is stronger than death. To say these things are to make truly earth shaking claims but we can believe them, even in times such as these. We can simply because Christ is risen, we are risen.