

“No One Went Back the Same Way They Came”

Matthew 27:62-28;10

Easter A

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If God raised the one who was crucified, we have lost our way. Then we're going to have a hard time going home the way we came.¹

John says that when they got to the tomb on Easter morning, they could see that it was empty. So they went back home. In the gospel of Luke two disciples comment “Some women told us that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but we had already planned to eat in Emmaus, so we couldn't change our reservations.” What do you make of people who could see an empty tomb, and go home just like nothing had happened? And what do you make of those who hear the announcement that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and not let it spoil lunch plans?

As William Willimon asks, “Just how dumb were these disciples anyway?” You don't get the idea of the resurrection of the dead out of brains like that. These are the sort of people who like to believe that you can have a resurrection of the dead and still go back to the world the way it was yesterday.

Well, now these goofy disciples are beginning to look a lot like us. Both they and we are amazingly adjusted to the same old world. Luke does Easter as a meal on a Sunday evening with the Risen Christ. John has Jesus encountering Mary Magdalen in the garden. Matthew tells it very differently. But for Matthew Easter is an earthquake that brings chaos to the wall of defense and denial against this rising. Easter is the earthquake renders our old selves and our old lives obsolete.

Matthew alone details the elaborate measures taken to keep Jesus in his tomb. The religious and political big shots had a meeting, and they sent in the military to seal up the tomb. Security was deliberate and thorough. There would be no funny business, nothing unusual.

Then this death will be like any other. Then after everyone has had a chance to pay their respects at Jesus' tomb they can all go back home the way they came. Then you could just heard the disciples' conversation, “It was good while it lasted. But in the end we could not get him elected Messiah. Death, as usual, has the last word. It's all so predictable. Sure we hoped . . . but you just have to face the facts. You want some lunch?”

Then religion could be a great reminiscence about all the fine principles of life Jesus promoted. Then they could have theological discussions. Then we could take the pre-resurrection Jesus as

¹ This sermon is an adaptation of William Willimon, “Easter as an Earthquake”: Matthew 28:1-10. Its structure and some of its language are his.

the model for life. Then salvation, such as it is, could be about what it has always been about: ideas and our applying them. Nothing would really change at all. Consider the security at the tomb to be a kind of self-defense. Just what we always wanted.

It was a good plan, that is, until the earthquake.

In 1974 we lived in the high desert in California. Out there you could see for twenty miles down arrow straight highways. We were walking in the desert not far from the highway on a beautiful day, the telephone poles stretched out to the horizon. And that was when we saw it. Almost imperceptibly at first, the distant the telephone poles jumped. Then one by one, like a row of dominoes, the jumping and swaying poles moved toward where we were. You couldn't take your eyes off of it.

Finally, the earthquake reached us. We put our arms out for balance. What was supposed to stay still didn't. It was the oddest most disorienting sensation I could have imagined. If you couldn't count on the earth standing still, what could you count on?

The way Matthew tells Easter, the earthquake happened first. It was a big earthquake. The secure stone the military had attended to was rolled back. And with a casualness not usually associated with an earthquake, the angel sat insouciant on top of the stone. The armed guard shuddered, slumped to the ground, and looked as though they were dead. So much for security.

At Easter, the one who was crucified -- the one the whole world judged to be a loser -- is vindicated by God. Instead of, like each of us, striving his whole life to be a god, he goes the other way. Jesus spent his life trying to be a human being. And he sticks to it to the end. "Obedient unto death, even death on the cross," is how Paul puts it (Phil. 2:8). And *this* is the one God raised at Easter. This is not the sort of winner you and I wanted. The resurrection is not the home team pulling one out in the last two minutes after playing a bad game. The earthquake of Easter is that the only one we all agreed was a loser, God vindicated and raised.² And the earth shook.

Easter, Matthew insists, is the earthquake that rattles the whole world. The world that always chases after winners, is in Easter handed the vindication of the loser. The one crucified is the one raised. You can't "explain" the resurrection. Rather, the resurrection explains us. That is the earthquake.

Easter is about God. It is not about resuscitation of a body. It's not about the immortality of the soul, or about some irrepressible beginning that inevitably comes around every spring. That's good Plato, but it is not God.

Easter is about God who has determined to forgive in a world that likes the *idea* of forgiveness, but not the *word* of forgiveness. So God throws himself in our way, let's himself be run over in

² This paragraph is from Gerhard O. Forde, "Loser Takes All: The Victory of Christ," *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 100.

Jesus' cross, effectively taking himself out of the picture. God lets us get what we want. "Like a sheep before its shearers," is how it is put in the Bible. And then the one who was killed is the one vindicated. God lets us have what we want, and then turns the tables on us. Easter is about God.

God is determined to run the world on forgiveness, not vengeance. And the earth shook. In a piece of bread and a sip of wine that risen and forgiving Jesus Christ is with you today. And the earth shook. Easter is that great vertigo of God vindicating the one we all agree was the loser of the world. And the earth shook.

The women came out of the cemetery intent on writing one last chapter in this long sad story. It would be something about how the good always get it in the end. This is the way the world is, resigned to live with the dead staying that way.

And then the earth heaved. Cesar's soldiers sank to the ground in a panic. The telephone poles jumped up and down and swayed. An angel plopped himself down on the rock and casually crossed his legs in one gracious and impudent gesture of defiance of death and all the facts of the world. And the angel said, "Don't be afraid."

And nobody went home the same way they came. Amen.