

SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2,14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week a violent earthquake struck Afghanistan. Over 1500 people died, thousands injured, and tens of thousands left homeless. Earthquakes are among the most powerful forces on earth. They occur because the world is broken, crisscrossed with fault lines. Sometimes stress on faults break rocks, releasing tremendous energy and causing earthquakes. Small earthquakes can "shake your windows and rattle your walls". Large earthquakes thrust valleys up to become mountains, reverse the flow of rivers, and plunge cliffs into the sea.

The most powerful earthquake ever recorded occurred on the first Easter. "After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake." *I don't know* what it measured on the Richter scale but *I do know* it caused a fissure, a deep crack, in time. Time split in two so that we now measure events *before* and *after Christ*. Some say that *time actually began to move backward* on the first Easter. Cambridge professor Stephen Hawking speculates that, if the universe stops expanding and begins to contract, time will run backward. Men and women will arise from their graves and grow younger as the universe contracts. On the first Easter morning "death began to work backward". The Easter earthquake split time in half and made it run backward.

The Easter earthquake wasn't caused by slipping tectonic plates but by an angel. "An angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone." The massive stone reminds us of the finality of death. Picture the angel moving the stone! I can't see Monica from *Touched by an Angel* rolling a two-ton stone. I see a muscular Michelangelo angel wearing work clothes, arms bulging, muscles rippling, able to bench press a thousand pounds. The angel put his brawny shoulder to the stone. The stone slowly rolled back. We can hear the grinding like the sound of a two thousand pound manhole slowly rolling down the street. One little push from the angel and the stone slab falls over. It rolls around

on its rim and finally falls flat and the earth quakes. *I once heard the earth quake in Buffalo, New York.* It sounded like a loud crack, like the crack of arcing electricity - except much louder. I looked to see where the sound came from. That night newscasters announced that people all over the North East heard the earth crack. It was the sound of rocks splitting far below in a fault that runs parallel to the East coast. On the first Easter, few people heard the earth crack, but a great, cataclysmic act, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, shook the world.

Earthquakes can cause dramatic changes in the landscape. For example, an earthquake rocked the Renaissance world when Copernicus claimed the earth revolved around the sun. People said, "That's impossible. Any fool can see that the sun revolves around the earth." *But Copernicus expanded our understanding of what's possible* and forever changed the intellectual landscape. Earthquakes cause dramatic change. The resurrection of Jesus shook the earth like it's *never* been shaken and forever changed the landscape. The Easter earthquake was so powerful that it rocked the foundations of *what's possible*. Not since the "Big-Bang" that jump-started-the-universe-has so-much-raw-power-been-released — *not to wreak havoc but to generate new life*. Christ's resurrection is the beginning of God's new creation. God is creating a new humanity through the power of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus offers a new world shaken by the power of a God determined to destroy death.

The resurrection of Jesus offers hope for this world as well as the next. It offers hope for the world's victims. It challenges forces in the world that can kill us. The Easter earthquake shakes the perpetrators of terror and the guardians of death. "For fear of (the Easter angel) the guards (at the tomb) shook and became like dead men." Later on Easter day Herod shook when he heard the news of Christ's resurrection. Soon, Christians turned the Roman world upside down proclaiming Christ's resurrection. The Easter earthquake scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly. The Swiss born poet, Kurt Marti writes -

*it might suit many lords fine
if everything were settled in death:
the dominion of the lords,
the servitude of the slaves*

would be confirmed forever

*it might suit many lords fine
if in eternity they stayed lords
in expensive private tombs
and their slaves stayed slaves
in rows of common graves*

*but a resurrection's coming
quite different from what we thought
a resurrection's coming which is god's rising against the lords
and against the lord of all lords – death*

But did the Easter earthquake really happen? Scholars argue about what took place that first Easter morning. For Christians this isn't just an academic question. If the story of Jesus really ended on the cross then it's hard to explain why we should follow him or what hope he can provide for the world or ourselves. I can only say what I believe. I believe in a *real* resurrection. I'm betting my life that Christ was raised from the dead, that he goes ahead of us, and that we will see him as we obey him. John Updike wrote,

*Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.*

I commend to you the Easter faith! I can't force it on you, nor would I want to! But I plead with you to consider the risen Christ! Go home and ruminate on the Easter story! Discuss it around the Easter table! Try to imagine the earthshaking consequences for your life if Jesus really was raised from the dead! If Christ is alive then neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Go a step further! We all make commitments about ultimate reality. Commitments aren't options. We've all made judgments about how to achieve meaning and happiness. As we journey ever more rapidly toward death some people wonder if they've chosen the right path. Are we traveling towards life or are we plummeting towards an insignificant, meaningless existence that terminates in death? The death

of a loved one can rock us and make this question come home to us. W. H. Auden wrote a beautiful poem, *Funeral Blues*, upon the death of someone he dearly loved. I heard it first at the movie, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* when Matthew delivers the eulogy for his lover Gareth. Listen to what Auden said in the face of death **(PLAY THE TAPE-TRACK 11)** -

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put the crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now; put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good. **(STOP TAPE WHEN MUSIC FADES OUT)***

We can all identify with Auden if we've lost a loved one. Death, like an earthquake, can shake the foundations of our faith. But Easter proclaims exactly the opposite of what Auden and we so often feel. We have no reason to stop the clocks, or to cut off the telephone. The dog can bark as much as it likes. And let the pianos, drums, bells, organs, Easter trumpets, stringed instruments and choirs proclaim, "He is not dead!" Christ is risen! Jesus is our North, our South, our East and West; He is our working week and our Sunday rest, our noon, our midnight, our talk, our song. He taught us that love lasts forever and he was not wrong — for He is risen! No earthquake can shake or destroy his love for us. On Easter he proved it.

God of earthquake, wind and fire, fill your church with the power that flows from that Easter earthquake and Christ's resurrection, that, in the midst of the sinful world, it may signal the beginning of a renewed humanity, risen to new life with Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.