

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Fear and Great Joy

Matthew 28

April 9, 2023

Blessed Easter morning to you. Today we bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This festive day has been celebrated with bells and alleluias, with changing colors and sunrise, with pastel dresses and family photos, with flowers, baskets, eggs, and feasting, and soon with the bread and cup of the Eucharist, itself bearing witness to the saving, transforming presence of Christ with us even now.

We bear witness today to mystery. No one really knows what happened there at the tomb. The first to bear witness to the resurrection were two women who went to the tomb where Jesus was buried early on the morning after the Sabbath day. There they encountered an angel who rolls away the stone and tells them, "I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here; he has been raised."

This pronouncement shook them like an earthquake. Matthew uses that word, at the angels' arrival, there was an earthquake, which means more than a slipping of tectonic plates beneath the earth's crust. For Matthew's gospel, earthquake, a *seismos*, goes even deeper. It is a cosmic-scaled disruption in creation. We see from the very first moments at dawn's twilights that the resurrection while shrouded in mystery and uncertainty is an event shaking the foundations of the world. This is the point.

Earthquakes show up in Matthew several times. When the disciples are at sea in their boat, and Jesus is asleep, a *seismos* comes upon them. My translation says tempest, others say storm, but the Greek word is *seismos*, an earthquake, a cosmic disruption. Jesus stills the quaking then. But at his death, another *seismos* shakes the earth and rips the curtain of the temple from top to bottom. At the resurrection, a *seismos* shakes the earth again. Every time there's a *seismos*, the world is changing at the presence, the passion, the resurrection of the Lord. The "seismoses" in the gospel of Matthew and in each of our lives—the disruptions are where the grace comes in.

Roman soldiers were immobilized in their fear. Even the greatest human empire the world has known is powerless in the face of he is crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's? Caesar has no power on this day. The cross, robbed of its power; the tomb, empty; the stone, away, and the power of God unleashed in a new way on the earth. Early on Easter morning, we do not know what this means, but we know something big has changed.

Or maybe we don't know or aren't quite sure. We all, the people of the world still hurried and busy, still bound in patterns of worry and addiction and resentment. We who hurt people and are hurt by people, whose minds can hardly be still long enough to pray; we who worry about tomorrow, we, with all our troubles . . . maybe we don't know all that yet, but two women do.

They bear witness for us all. In these moments, maybe only two women know what the shaken cosmos also knows. That everything has already changed.

I wonder if you feel that this morning in any way—that sense of what? How should we put this? Is there even a word for this? The Bible reaches not for one word but for three: the women left the tomb with fear and great joy—those three words fear and great joy. I wonder if you feel any of that this morning.

I remember in high school before a big basketball game, our coach sat next to me in the locker room. “Are you ready?” He asked. “Yes, coach.” “Show me your hand.” I held out my hand. It was slightly shaking with adrenaline. “You’re nervous,” he said. He held out his hand. Still. No movement at all. “That’s what you need to be,” he said. “You can’t let the moment be too big for you. You need to be calm for moments like this.” At that moment, I looked at him like a biblical prophet, the fluorescent halo blinking on and off around his head as if he was the prophet saying, “Do not be afraid.” And we took to court that day.

We ran out of the locker room that day, and we got whipped. Which was pretty normal. We pretty much stunk. I wondered maybe if he had a little more, maybe he could have helped us not stink so bad. Maybe if he had a little more, he could have helped us rise to the occasion and realize that there are some big moments that call everything of you, that are bigger than you are, and they call you to be bigger than who you’ve been. Maybe if he had a little more he wouldn’t have gotten fired the next year.

There are moments that are bigger than you are, and you don’t take them in stride. There’s a time for calmness, for *apatheia* as the ancient spiritual masters taught, a place for dispassion. We need places of serenity. I think of sitting on a beach on a warm day with the waves rolling in and a good book. Or sitting with a mountain view on a cool summer morning watching the sun rise over a field of wildflowers. Those thoughts, those memories bring me great delight. So do so many others, even associated with Easter—the delight of taking in an Easter feast after weeks of Lenten fast, even if the Lenten fast wasn’t perfectly followed. The Easter delight of girls in their new shoes and little boys in their little bow ties. I’m in for all of it. The bluebonnet pictures. The choir letting it loose. It’s all delight.

Joy is something other. There’s something different about it. The women had great joy when they left the tomb. There’s a difference between delight and happiness or joy. Everyone kind of knows this in one way or another. It’s a difference of degree. Happiness or delight can name small things, but joy names the big things. That’s true. Another way to look at it is that happiness or delight depends on the circumstances while joy is there no matter what. That’s also a good description—the beach can make you happy, but you’re not always at a beach, so do you have joy in life even when you’re not at the beach? I think you get the idea—whatever your beach image is.

But I think it comes down to something even more than this. At least in Matthew’s gospel, it does. Joy in the gospel is never experienced in the absence of risk, sacrifice, or uncertainty.

Great Joy is where delight intersects with new possibilities that require risking something big for something good.

In the story of Jesus' birth, wise men from the east rejoiced when they saw the star over Bethlehem, yet even then knew their adoration of the Christ child already put him and them in danger of Herod's wrath. They went home another way, and Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt. Everything changed for each of them.

Later, in the parable of the sower and the seeds, one kind of person hears the gospel with immediate great joy but then encounters tribulation and persecution. And the question is asked: Will their faith fall away? Life is going to change one way or the other.

Later in one of Jesus' parables, a man finds a treasure hidden in a field, so he buries it and in great joy, sells all he has to buy the field. He risks everything that day. Everything in his life changes and is described as joy.

In the parable of the talents, you'll remember, one servant was afraid of his master so he hid what had been entrusted to him in the ground and returned it unchanged when his master returned because he was afraid of not just his master, but afraid of fear itself. The other two risked failure with what they had been entrusted and so were invited to share in their master's joy.

In every case, in the gospel of Matthew, the experience of joy is associated with a moment in life that changes everything and requires sacrifice, risk-taking, faith, trust, and courage. Joy comes in moments that mean something. Those moments are bigger than me and my understanding of the moment. To have pleasure that means little is happiness. To experience joy means you are in a moment that is going to change everything.

No wonder it's a moment of fear and great joy. It's not fear that gives way to joy when there's nothing left to fear. And it's not joy that gives way to fear when the stakes are revealed.

It's an experience for which we do have a single word. Those experiences in life where fear and joy are intermingled--the gap in space-time between when you ask the girl of your dreams, "Will you go out with me?" and she answers. Fear and great joy. The experience of waking up on your wedding day. Fear and great joy. When there are two lines on the pregnancy test, when the adoption papers come through... Fear and great joy.

The fuel of joy isn't unruffled comfort. The fuel of joy is the earth-shaking, life-changing moment of transformation you let yourself get swept into. The path of great joy is faith.

And it turns out we do have a word for this. Easter. What does Easter mean to you? We can be people who leave this place with fear and great joy because what we have encountered we know is changing our lives. And that will cost us something dearly. Or we can go on as if nothing has changed.

For some, that's a call to take a step of faith. To baptism, or to risk something big for something good in your faith.

For some, that's a call to know you can face tribulation and persecution and not fall away.

For some, that's a call to repentance, for others, it's a call to forgiveness.

For some, that's a call to be brave and lay down your life for others.

And for some, that's a call to courage, to compassion, to a new way of being in the world. We do not walk from the tomb simply reassured of our place in the world. We walk away from the empty tomb shaken down to our toes, which carry us forward in a new world.

Now we step forward on our toes into a changed consciousness, a new hope empowering a new generous love, and a new capacity to forgive and receive forgiveness. We step forward with some fear and great joy in the presence and power of our risen Lord, with us even now and forevermore.

Amen.

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