

**A homily preached by the Rev. Martin L. Smith at the Church of the  
Transfiguration, New York, at the Easter Vigil, April 15, 2006**

“And suddenly there was a great earthquake...” (Matt. 28:2)

There are three earthquakes to think about today. One is what we might call the geophysical earthquake. Jerusalem is just a few miles from one of the great seismic fault lines of the earth, one that has created the Jordan Valley, the deepest rift in the earth’s surface. This Passover weekend there had been a few earthquakes. That wasn’t at all unusual.

Then there is the symbolic, dramatic, earthquake of Matthew’s highly wrought resurrection story. Here the earthquake has become a theatrical effect ushering in the descending angel who provides the force to roll back the stone from the sealed tomb.

But the earthquake I want us to consider tonight is the inner earthquake of our own salvation stories. People talk about faith as something that can easily be shaken. But true faith is actually born *as a result of having been shaken*. We must ask ourselves whether we have experienced that inner shake up, the moving of the very ground under our feet, that rolls back the stone inside our hearts, the stone that keeps Jesus entombed as a figure of the past.

What we mean by the Resurrection is that unique and traumatic event—an event only the Creator could bring about—that released Jesus from being a dead figure who would have been soon relegated to the past, and released him into the future to be the Lord of our future and the world’s. “He has been raised from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” (28:7)

Because of the Resurrection Jesus is already in the future, as our future, and as we enter what is new—what has never happened before—he greets us, having gotten there ahead of us.

This is traumatic because it is truly a reversal that upends human religiosity. Human religions are usually mythically structured round the past and the revelation that took place once upon a time. Thousands or hundreds of years ago, God or the gods revealed the truth to our tribe, our ancestors, dictating the rituals to be repeated for ever, the laws to be observed, and the traditions to be handed down. So our role is almost entirely restricted to perpetuating the traditions, obeying the laws, repeating the rituals. Religion is mainly conceived as fidelity to the past.

What makes the resurrection so earthshaking and traumatic is that this concept of religion has suddenly become completely outdated and misguided. God is not to be found by conserving the past, but in pursuing the calling to co-create an unprecedented new world with a Savior who goes ahead of us and gives us his Spirit, the Spirit of innovation and improvisation and invention. The Spirit given by the Risen Christ is his breath, and the thing about breath is that if you try to hold it or keep it you die! To live is to let go by

breathing out in order to receive the next breath quite new as a gift. The Spirit is God directly coming into us from the future so that we can open up the present to become that future that he desires.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (1 Cor. 5:17) For the first time in human history, God is proclaimed as the One who puts us under the authority of the future, instead of the past.

Now in the letter to the Ephesians there is a snatch of a Christian hymn, deriving from the earliest days of the faith. Its proclamation of Easter life is an arousal from sleep. “Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” (5:14) When the inner earthquake happens we awaken from spiritual sleep and our desire for the real life of God is aroused.

We can expect to start *wanting*. Wanting is the sure sign of coming to life.

We will actually want to experience that inner earthquake that will roll away the stone in our hearts that keeps Jesus entombed in the past and our true selves dead and bound.

We will want to set free from the past in order to be available to the future. We will want to be free to show up for partnership with the Christ who goes ahead of us into the unknown. Paul witnessed to this arousal of desire in his letter to the Philippians when he wrote, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” (3:10) What that meant in practice he was unafraid to spell out. “This one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (3:13)

We will want to be co-creators with Christ of a changed world. We will not only want to experience the earthquake, we will want to become part of it, by becoming *movers and shakers* ourselves. We will want to live hope. And that has nothing to do with being optimists. Optimism is usually a testimony to the power of denial and the need, arising from fear, for happy endings. The kind of hope we live in Christ is the polar opposite of denial. It is based on the cross, which leads to a ruthless realism about the depth of human brokenness and the intensity of the violence and division that has the human race in its grip. The cross is profoundly disillusioning, since the grotesque injustice of Christ’s death was brought about by the ‘good intentions’ of the finest religion in the world and the greatest government. It reveals the extent to which even the best of human achievements can still be blind to the presence and grace of the Creator. Hope stems from the resurrection as God’s insistent life-giving reply to humanity’s denial, the Yes that continually responds with healing and reconciliation to humanity’s repeated No.

Finally, in the Resurrection we accept our wanting to be wanted. I am claiming an ancient right that Easter preachers used to have to lapse from good taste. You may not know that in the olden days preachers were expected to tell a joke in their Easter sermon to represent the humor of God’s victory that turns tragedy into a divine comedy of reversal and love’s triumph. It was called the *risus Paschalis*, the Paschal joke.

Well, where do we make a joking reference to earthquakes? We have all heard a wry and oblique reference to having good sex in words such as, "Did you feel the earth move?" The inner earthquake of Easter is the discovery of God as lover, God's passion for us, God's longing for union with us. God raised Christ from the dead because he would not suffer his Holy One to see corruption, he could not bear to be separated from Jesus by death and wanted to embrace into life all that he was, wounded body and all. But none of this makes sense except as a sign of God's desire to raise into his life the fullness and completeness of our lives, including our wounds also. Through the inner earthquake we awake to the discovery that we are the desire of God's heart and the Church obstinately insists in its creed on affirming the resurrection of the body as a symbol of God's intention to raise you and me up in our entirety and in all our relationships.

So in the resurrection Christ goes before us not just for the rest of our earthly pilgrimage but into our eternal future where we will reach our destiny of endless union with God and communion with each and with all.