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Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

STORY TELLERS

Easter begins with an earthquake. The two Marys arrive at the tomb early in the morning and experience a great earthquake. You can bet that got their attention! We will recall the recent earthquake that hit Western New York back in early February. Many of us were still in our beds at 6:15 a.m. when the earthquake woke us up and got our attention.

The biblical stories often used earthquakes as a literary technique to get the reader's attention and to alert us that some kind of divine activity is about to take place in the story. And so the teller of this morning's Easter story, the writer of Matthew's gospel, gets our attention today by beginning with an earthquake. So we know that something extraordinary is about to take place in the story.

That is why we have gathered here today—to hear this extraordinary story we call the Resurrection. We've heard it before but we need to hear it again. It's the story the angel shared with the two Marys at the tomb that morning. "He is not here," the angel said, "for he has been raised." And then the angel sends them away with the charge to tell the story to others. "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead.'"

Now this is *not* a sensible story. The resurrection of someone from the dead makes no natural sense. It is an incomprehensible story. And I am not going to try to make rational sense from this story, to clarify or demystify this story. Today I stand alongside the Apostle Paul who whispers to us, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die but we will all be changed . . . death has been swallowed up in victory."

The story we gather to hear today is a mystery story. We can't fully understand it. But we come because we need it. We come to hear it because the other stories we live with and are surrounded by have worn us down. Our personal stories are often filled with shards of glass that have left us cut and wounded: fractured relationships, broken dreams, losses and deaths, abuses we have suffered and addictions we wrestle against.

As we struggle to craft our own personal stories in this broken world, we come to hear this mystery story of God's love and to ponder what meaning it might have for us.

One of the occasions that prompts me to ponder my life's story are at funerals. At funerals people remember the life of the person who has died and they tell stories: funny stories, sad stories, stories about the person's hobbies and passions. Funerals always make we wonder what is shaping my life's story. Am I just taking up space on this earth until the day I die, is my life nothing but a series of random events, or is there something else that shapes my story and gives it meaning and purpose? What will define my life: will it be tragedies and hardships, bitterness over wrongs I've suffered? Will it be the work I've done, or the family I've cared for? When it comes to *my* funeral, what stories will others remember about my life?

What story shapes your life? Is it your family? Your career? Your desire for beauty? Your love for animals? Your quest for fun? What holds your life together in a meaningful, coherent story?

And then what happens when the story we have created for ourselves begins to fall apart? Because they all do. When our marriage ends. Or when we face bankruptcy. Or when we lose the house. Or when our bodies betray us with illness or aging?

What if the story we've created for ourselves ceases to fulfill us—if the successful career and the house full of nice things feels empty and hollow? What do we do if tragedy bursts upon

our story—death of loved ones, profound, heart wrenching tragedies of some kind? What happens when the story we have wanted to believe about ourselves begins to unravel—when we are forced to confront our personal failings: the way we’ve hurt others, or let people down, or let ourselves down? How do we manage our lives when our story comprises, as it will, as it always will, personal failure, brokenness, and pain?

Of course, the stories that bear weight upon our lives also arise from our collective realities. Our personal realities are part of a larger narrative at play in a world overwhelmed with stories of genocide, cruelty, child abuse, poverty, school shootings, and climatic upheaval. So how do we create a meaningful story when evil is so strong?

The Oscar winning film, *No Country For Old Men*, is a contemporary Western drama of the age-old conflict between good and evil. But unlike other western films, this story does not have a happy ending. In this very violent movie, the bad guy becomes the personification of evil itself. His violent actions are random, senseless, and exceedingly brutal. He follows a set of rules incomprehensible to any sane person. Set against this evil individual is the sheriff of the community. And this good man is paralyzed by the nature of the modern day crime he is called upon to fight—with its drug wars and the exceeding brutality of the killings, by the senseless violence, and by the sheer scale of the evil around him. The sheriff goes through the motions of investigating the cases before him without any real hope of bringing about justice or ending the violence. Toward the end of the movie, the bad guy who is the personification of evil *is* almost killed—but not by the efforts of the good guys working together to stop him—but by a random accident. And the movie ends with Evil limping off, injured, but still very much alive, and the sheriff deciding to retire, totally defeated by the futility of his job.

This deeply depressing account might be considered a Good Friday story. It is a story about the power of evil and its apparent triumph in our world. This is what the disciples must have felt and believed following the crucifixion. In their sorrow, in their shame, in their horror, it surely must have seemed as if Evil had won, as if Evil was unstoppable.

But this is *not* the story God leaves us with. And so we gather today to hear the rest of the story. We gather to hear the story of God's triumph over evil and death and brokenness. Today we join the Apostle Paul in declaring, "Where, O death, is your victory?" For Christ is risen.

And the truth of *that* story has power in our lives and in our world. On Easter we are given a new story. You are loved. You are forgiven. And you have a place in the story of God's love. No matter who you are, what you have done, God's story of love and life and resurrection wraps its arms around you and enfolds you. The great mystery story of God's resurrecting presence is being written in your life and in our world.

The Easter story means that we no longer need to fear death and we no longer need to fear life. For there is nothing that can stop the God of love and the God of life. Not your death or my death. Not the evil in this world. Not our own personal failings and tragedies. God has reached into the tomb, into your heartache and failures, into our broken and wounded world, and brought forth life. The life-giving God is on the loose.

And *that* is the story that gives coherence to our lives—*that* is the story that holds us together when our lives unravel and fall apart. *That* is the story that will bear us through our tragedies and which will offer us hope. *That* is the story that will pick us up again and again when we fail. Our life-giving God cannot be contained or confined by the tombs of this world.

Our God is bigger and more loving and more transformative than all your failures or the brokenness of this world.

But let us also remember that we are not only recipients of this great mystery story, but we are called to be *tellers* of this story. The angel commissions the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is risen from the dead. And then as they leave the tomb, they encounter Jesus himself. And he repeats the same instructions, “Go and tell.” Tell about the resurrection. Tell the story.

We who are gathered here today are tellers of this incredible, life-changing story. We tell this story not only with words but through everything we do in our lives. We tell this story through our compassion to those who are suffering, through our efforts to bring comfort to those in sorrow. We tell this story by how we spend our money and share our resources. We tell this story by confronting injustice and standing up for the voiceless. We tell this story when we strive to forgive and work for reconciliation.

In a world overwhelmed with Good Friday stories, we are given a great life-giving mystery story to live and to tell. How will your life proclaim this story? How will you tell this story today and tomorrow by how you live and love? The world needs us to be tellers of God’s incomprehensible and yet life-altering story of resurrecting love. We rise each day from our beds with a story to tell. “Listen,” let us say to the world around us, “listen, and I will tell you a mystery!”