

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew the 28th chapter (28:1-10 NRSV):

28After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It is an odd proclamation to make in these earth-shaking, earth-quaking, seismic times we seem to be living in, isn't it? It was that first time it was proclaimed, as well.

Have you ever had an earth-shaking, earth-quaking, seismic experience? One of those moments when you feel as if your whole world has been changed forever, has been turned upside down, so much so that you are surprised beyond belief?

I don't just mean moments that are life-altering in a small sense like eating the best piece of fried chicken you have ever had or being able to emulate your grandmother's mac-n-cheese.

No, I mean those earth-shaking, earth-quaking, seismic experiences that like: the birth of your children, getting married, answering that call to take a job that meant uprooting everything and everyone with you. Or the diagnosis that changed your life forever.

Maybe more real for you has been the reality of what has felt like earth-shaking, earth-quaking, seismic experiences living amidst the shadow of the COVID-19 virus.

And yet, yet here on this day, we continue to proclaim, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Possibly a proclamation needed now, more than ever before in our lives.

That first Easter was like that for the women who went to "see the tomb", to literally "hold vigil". The angel speaks to Jesus' followers, to those sad ones who had drawn near the one they had loved, and had lost.

These women experienced an earth-shaking, earth-quaking, seismic moment. To them, the angel looks like lightning—a sizzling power, fraught with danger. Pivotal words are translated as 'suddenly' or 'behold' or 'look here' cannot convey the untranslatable truth that in this sequence of events, light has split a crack in the universe and everything we thought we knew is changed.

This story contains two such moments: "Suddenly. . .there was a great earthquake" and "Suddenly Jesus met them." When you meet Jesus, encounter the Risen Christ - the ground moves beneath your feet. Nothing remains as it was.

Between those two "suddenlies", there is fear and seeing. Listen: "for fear. . .the guards shook," "do not be afraid," "they (the women) left with fear and joy."

We are told, "come, see this place," "you will see him," "they will see me." Even in what the angel says, "you are looking for Jesus," the verb has the sense of seeking what was once in hand and is now lost. Looking for and yearning, fearing and seeing are entwined in the presence of the holy.

Perhaps from Matthew's gospel, we can make the assertion that we cannot see what is truly important without also experiencing fear.

"We cannot meet Jesus without being shaken. That these two human capacities are linked is evident in their being tied together in this crucial experience for Jesus's followers."¹

Tied up with the assurance that Christ is present with us is the angel's message about our fears - "Do not be afraid." In English, it sounds like a command and, as such, it is impossible to achieve.

Fear simply rises-up in us when we are confronted with a threatening moment. The fear is physical; it takes the form of an adrenaline burst, it makes the heart race, it gives us the energy to flee for survival, if necessary. Over time, the stresses of fear take their toil in many forms that wear down both our physical strength and our mental well-being.

"So, the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

They left the tomb, a place of death and, in this case, rebirth. You can look back over your life and even in these most recent days and see that some things have died and are still dying. Other things began to grow and still are growing. Both tombs and wombs are dark, scary places: a place of death and fear and a place of new birth and joy.

With fear and joy—you can't get a more accurate description for life than that, huh?

With fear: fear of failure? Success? Loss of friends? Boredom? Or, all of the above?

With joy: Joy in accomplishments? Ministry? New Adventures? New people and places?

With fear and joy---they run to tell the others: "To tell" underneath all we do in life is the WORD. In Richard Lischer's, "The End of Words," we are reminded that our "end," our purpose, is telling the good news of God in all we do and say.

What the angel says about fear is, however, not a command. The sense of "Do not be afraid" is not an emphatic requirement but a comforting assurance: There is nothing to fear. You need not fear.

This calming voice comes from an authority who speaks with a power that is beyond this world—a messenger who, the story tells us, rolled away a huge stone, sat on it, shone like electricity, engendered such a sight that the guards passed out, and then had the audacity to tell the women there was nothing to fear, the women are then instructed by the angel to move into their lives with heroic abandon. We, too, are so instructed. Because God's power has overturned all expectation in our world, we have nothing from which to coil into self-protection.

¹ Melinda Quivick

The women were still afraid, of course, Courage is not simply throwing caution to the wind, but action despite the danger. Their fear, we can now see, also is accompanied with joy. With their fear and joy, the women ran to share the news with the disciples, for in that fear and with that joy and in that telling—there, there, there - Jesus meets them—and us.

It seems as if we don't have to look far in this world for things that cause us great earth-shattering, earth-quaking fear.

We fear. . .where the next paycheck will come from.

We fear. . .will we have health care.

We fear. . .will my child get into college.

We fear. . .will the cancer go away.

We fear. . .will there be a call and job for me.

We fear. . .what church will this church be in this next chapter of our Reforming journey and post virus.

In that fear, the risen one meets us. Sometimes going ahead of us, sometimes showing up in the neighbor and friend. Sometimes meeting us in the dead of night with the assurance of our love's presence. Meeting us in our prayers, in our advocacy for what is good and just, in our own gratitude for life and resurrection. Meeting us here in this moment and at this time.

In those moments, at those tombs, proclaim Christ! Proclaim Christ crucified, dead, buried, and risen. Help to move the stones away to where in those moments for those you will be called to serve and for your own ears, "Do not be afraid."

This may not be the Easter we had asked for or even the one we had hoped for, I am sure the same could have been said that first Easter day, but the joy of Easter as it always has been is the message of hope and action that Jesus gave the women at the tomb, is the same for us: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell!"

The world, you and I need to hear that more than ever, I think. Do not be afraid. Go and tell that Chris is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.