

## **“A Resurrection People”**

Easter Sunday

Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

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Have you ever felt an earthquake?

I've never lived in California or Japan or any of those parts of the world where powerful earthquakes often occur. I've lived my entire life here in the center of North America, not a place where earthquakes are all that common. Even if we've been told that someday the New Madrid fault in Missouri will have a big one felt throughout this part of the country.

But, one time, I felt the earth shake.

It occurred about a decade ago. My son Sebastian was just a little baby, asleep beside me in bed. I think it was a Saturday morning, and we were sleeping in late that day. And in my sleep I began to roll back and forth. Slowly I became aware of this sensation. Soon I was emerging from sleep into consciousness, and when I was in that in-between zone—when you aren't sure whether you're awake or not and what's dream and what's real—I wasn't sure if I was really rolling or not. Was this really happening?

I opened my eyes a little, and they were blurry, but I looked up to see the painting on the bedroom wall swaying. Then I realized Sebastian next to me was also rolling back and forth between me and his other father, as if he was being rocked on a boat.

And that's exactly what it felt like—as if I was on a boat, rolling up and down in the waves, except, I was in my house, in Omaha, Nebraska, and everything was rolling and swaying.

Just as the motion began to subside, I finally truly woke up. And then I sat there wondering—“Was that an earthquake?”

Of course I hopped onto Facebook and posted that question. Soon I was seeing other people posting asking the same thing and comments began to appear on my post. But the strange thing was that I realized people I knew from all over the center of the country were posting too, not just folks in Omaha. I saw posts from Kansas and Missouri and then Arkansas. Then I saw that my sister living in central Oklahoma had posted that she'd just experienced an earthquake. It seemed that the whole center of the country had just been tossed around. Was this the big one?

It wasn't the big one. The US Geological Survey eventually announced that it was a 5.6 magnitude quake, with an epicenter in north-central Oklahoma. It had been a shallow quake and had radiated out through the soft ground of the Great Plains, being felt over a wide geographic area, but, fortunately, not bringing damage with it.

It was all anyone could talk about the next few days in Omaha. With some deep sleepers annoyed because they had slept right through it. One of my church members said what woke him was not the movement, but the clay tiles on his roof rattling.

It was so strange to feel the solid earth moving more like a liquid. To feel unexpectedly unstable. And even moreso for it to have occurred for me in that strange zone between sleep and consciousness when it is difficult to latch onto what is real.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that as the two grieving Marys approached the tomb of their friend Jesus, the earth shook.

Now, in their case, it was because an angel was darting down from heaven to roll the stone away.

But the earthquake is one of striking features of Matthew's telling of the Easter story.

Lutheran seminary professor Matt Skinner calls our attention to the earthquake. Which is not the only one in Matthew's gospel connected to Jesus. Why all the earthquakes? They must mean something. As Skinner writes, “Nothing is ever certain during an earthquake. Nothing is stable. Everything totters.”

This story is literally “seismic.” Easter destabilizes. It creates uncertainties. It sets everything to moving.

Today’s epistle reading announced that we have been raised with Christ. We are told that the power of the resurrection is ours. The new life in Christ is our life. That because of that new life, we are being revealed in glory.

In other words, the Easter story is our story.

In their commentary on this passage from Colossians, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat write that we “can dwell in the story and allow it to reshape [our] imagination because it is not a story that simply happened to someone else but is now [our] story.”

We can dwell in this story and claim its power for ourselves, letting it guide our lives in new directions.

But maybe we should first admit that it’s a weird story.

Not least because it calls for us to believe that someone died and then rose again to new life. There’s plenty else that’s strange in this story. Matt Skinner writes, “We shouldn’t pretend that Easter isn’t pretty weird.” The earthquake is just part of it.

In Matthew’s version an angel flashes into view, rolling the stone away from the tomb, while the two Marys stand there as amazed eyewitnesses. The angel then gets a little cheeky, sitting down on the stone, surely in its heaviness intended to be a symbol of weight and finality, and the sovereignty of the Roman Empire that put it there and sealed it. As if to say, according to Rome, this Jesus guy is finished and done for.

No, the angel breaks the imperial seal, rolls the stone aside, then casually sits upon it and starts chatting with the women. He tells them to tell the others that Jesus is risen and that they are to go Galilee and wait for him. They run off, the story tells us, “with fear and great joy.”

Even weirder in Matthew’s telling, other previously dead people resurrected and started walking around Jerusalem visiting people. That odd little detail is told to us in chapter 27, verses 52 and 53, after another one of those earthquakes in the Jesus story. Talk about destabilizing and weird. Upending expectations and getting things moving. Including things that should never move again.

That’s the weird story we are invited to draw upon for our own power and glory.

“Resurrection . . . throws us askew.”

That’s how Jimmy Hoke, our own Director of Children’s Ministries, who is also a New Testament scholar, describes it in his commentary.

He writes that the Easter story is “an attempt to give words to an event that set people askew.” They really didn’t know what to make of the experiences they had of the Risen Jesus, and these stories that they told were their attempts to make some sense of it.

We also aren’t sure what to make of it either. As familiar as this story is, as central to our faith, it still throws us askew, like the earthquake, destabilizing, uncertain, weird, but also open to possibilities.

Maybe this is a clue as to what it means to be a resurrection people. To claim the resurrection for ourselves, as Colossians instructs us to.

Maybe to be resurrection people is to let this story, to let the resurrection, throw us askew as well. Like the earthquake, to shake things loose that need to be shaken loose. Like the angel, to mock the pretenses of power. Like the women, to send us running with fear and great joy to tell people what we’ve experienced. Like the disciples, to take action to go where Jesus tells us and to move the world into a better future.

We should not be the same after our encounter with resurrection. We are given the opportunity to begin again, to make a fresh start, to be open to a life of adventurous possibilities.

So, this weird story that sets us askew is the one that we are invited to dwell within, to let it shape our imaginations, and to form our character.

Our imaginations are not subject to the empire or the status quo or bound by what has happened in the past. All of that has been shaken loose. Now our imaginations are set free, so that we might radiate with divine power and shine with holy glory.

Easter surprises us with the possibilities of new life. But what kind of life is it?

“Christians are the eternal beginners,” wrote Franz Rosenzweig.

I first encountered that quote in a book by the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann.

It was twenty-two years ago, when I was thirty years old. At the time, I was in the process of coming out. My first gay relationship had ended quickly and unexpectedly, leaving me heartbroken and depressed. All at a time when I was trying to decide when and how to come out to my family and to the church I was serving. So, it was a season of my life full of complex emotions, when I was making decisions that would impact me forever after. I felt tossed about, like in an earthquake. Life was unstable and uncertain, with no clear sense of the path ahead.

In the midst of all of that, I attended a denominational meeting, in Charlotte, North Carolina. As I’m accustomed to doing at such meetings, I spent time in the exhibit hall, particularly browsing the books for sale. The first day of the conference, I bought a copy of Jurgen Moltmann’s *In the End, the Beginning—The Life of Hope*. I started reading the book that afternoon and couldn’t put it down. I finished it in a hurry because it was precisely the book I needed to read in that moment of my life. And it’s ideas on resurrection and hope have shaped my thinking ever since.

Moltmann taught me to embrace the instability, the weirdness, the being askew, as an opportunity. A moment of possibility, ripe with creativity and adventure. A new beginning. And, as such, a source of hope. That’s is what it means to claim the power of the resurrection, to be a resurrection people.

Moltmann develops this idea that Christians are the eternal beginners, by declaring that Christian faith is Easter faith. “Christianity,” he writes, “is wholly and entirely confident hope, a stretching out to what is ahead, and a readiness for a fresh start.”

Central to his point is the reality that at any given moment of our lives there are an infinite number of possible futures. No matter what has happened to us in the past, or the uncertainties of the present, our futures are always open to possibilities. Every moment can be a new beginning.

And that reality is what empowers our hope.

Which is exactly what I needed to hear in 2004 in that moment of instability, uncertainty, and despair.

That message resonates. People need to hear that they are not confined by the status quo, or what’s happened in the past, or the powers-that-be. All of that has been shaken loose, the world set askew, and now every moment in life is overflowing with possibilities.

Moltmann declares that ours is “a life that begins every moment, and an awakening vitality, provided that we look to the future and welcome the possibilities of the new morning. Every moment in life is an end of the past and a beginning of the future.”

That kind of living hope is what it means to be a resurrection people.

Now, Moltmann did not arrive at this hope-filled realization through a life of comfort. No, he came to it through catastrophe, suffering, and alienation. His world shaken loose in violent and destructive ways.

Jurgen Moltmann grew up as a child in Nazi Germany. As a student, he and his classmates were called upon to participate in the defense of their city, Hamburg. As a teen, he was compelled to man an anti-aircraft battery, along with his classmates.

In July 1943, the RAF appeared over the city of Hamburg and fire bombed it, killing 40,000 people. Bombs exploded on the site of Moltmann’s anti-aircraft battery. His friend, manning the battery with him, was killed. He only survived the firestorm by being blown into the water. Moltmann wrote of this

night, “Whenever I call up that catastrophe and descend into the dark pit of remembrance, I am overwhelmed again by fear and trembling.”

His suffering did not end there. At the end of the war, he spent three years in a British prisoner of war camp. In the midst of his alienation, searching for answers to deep existential questions, he started reading the Bible. It was the lament Psalms that first spoke to him and began to provide him with an understanding.

Ultimately, it was reading about Jesus’s death on the cross that grabbed Moltmann and never let him go. He read there of Jesus’s cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In that moment, Moltmann realized “this is one who understands you.” A Jesus who had suffered on the cross was a Jesus who understood the horrors of life. Jesus understood *him*, and what he had lived through.

Moltmann writes, “That gave me new courage to live. I saw colours again, heard music again, and felt the stirrings of renewed vitality.”

Which then led him to discover “that in every end a new beginning lies hidden. It will find you if you look for it. Don’t lose heart!”

A theology of Christian hope, then, is not some naïve optimism. Hope is born out of catastrophe.

That is our Easter faith. The Good Fridays of our lives and of our history do not have the final word. On the other side of Good Friday is Easter Sunday, when we rise again in glory, a new creation, full of hope.

When the earth shakes and everything tumbles and all seems unstable and uncertain, when the world is weird, and we are askew, that’s precisely when we can begin again.

The women ran from the tomb with fear and great joy. And they ran to where the others were and delivered the angel’s message, to go to Galilee and there await the coming of Jesus.

And that’s precisely what the followers of Jesus did. In the midst of their grief over losing their friend, afraid that the Roman troops might also be coming for them, confused and astounded by the strange tales the Marys told them, they mustered the courage and the hope to begin again.

So they took action. They traveled to Galilee, and there they waited for Jesus. And Jesus showed up. And when he did, he commissioned them to become disciples to all the nations, spreading the message and way of life of Jesus everywhere.

And, the plan worked. That’s exactly what they did.

When Rome rolled that stone in front of the tomb and sealed it with the imperial seal, they thought that Jesus of Nazareth was finished and done for. Well, they sure were wrong. Because here we gather in 2026 on a different continent to tell this story and celebrate this festival of resurrection.

Because we’ve claimed this story and its power for ourselves. This story is our story. Shaping our imaginations and our characters and inspiring us for new life.

We are not the same after our Easter encounter. We are given the opportunity to begin again, to make a fresh start, to be open to a life of adventurous possibilities.

When the earth is unstable, events are uncertain, everything is weird, and we are askew, that becomes the opportunity to move forward, with hope and courage, filled with new life.

Because we are a resurrection people.