

ROCKED BY THE RESURRECTION<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 28: 1-10  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
April 24, 2011

Humans are in a predicament. Easter is about dealing with that predicament. Here is the predicament: there is a death stone out there that we can't move, try as we might. We are in a mortal predicament.

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Easter is all about that predicament. It comes with a story about a mighty earthquake that removes the stone. Easter is about being rocked by resurrection. The Bible has four accounts of it in what we call "gospels": Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of them tells a story about the resurrection, and each of them has a different emphasis. That should be no surprise. Every author comes from a different perspective.

This year we are looking closely at Matthew's perspective. Matthew's major issue was the great stone. He seems to be preoccupied with that great stone sealing the tomb. He has two women approaching the tomb early on Sunday morning. Unlike other gospel accounts, the women have no intention of trying to move the stone or getting someone else to move it. They know the stone is there to stay. As far as they are concerned, it is permanent.

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There is no mention of trying to anoint the body the way the other gospels tell the story. These two women were merely paying a visit to the tomb. Roman soldiers have been placed outside the tomb to guard it against grave robbers.

So when we read the first verse of Matthew's resurrection story, we get nothing unusual. Two women going to visit a grave site—nothing unusual about that. But for Matthew, that great stone in front of the grave is a symbol of the finality of death. The massiveness of the stone is like the massiveness of the death that confronts us all. The women are helpless to move the stone the way we are helpless to remove death from before us. The stone is so great, in fact, that in Matthew's view, no human power is great enough to remove it.

So in Matthew, we get a higher power, which comes in the form of an earthquake. This earthquake is Matthew's unique contribution to the Easter story. It is a literary way of saying that resurrection is not a human event; it is a cosmic event, something that can only happen by divine intervention. To be rocked by the resurrection is to feel the earth shake. In Matthew's account, only an *angel of the Lord* (whose *appearance was like lightning*) can roll away that massive stone of death.

## II

I have two friends whose daughter was planning her wedding. That is always a challenge, but in this case the wedding plans were complicated because the groom's mother had cancer, and after surgery the news was devastating. The

cancer had spread and her mortality prognosis was revised from months to days. The doctors did not expect her to leave the hospital. What should they do about the wedding?

So the young couple decided to move the wedding date up so his mother could be part of it. The bride had already picked out her wedding dress, and the seamstress agreed to overnight alterations. The hospital provided a small room for the ceremony, and the surgeon volunteered to play the little organ, his first public performance. The family's pastor quickly planned the service. The staff of the hospital provided festive decorations for the occasion. They even managed to find a candelabra somewhere in the hospital. The nurses provided a lavish spread of food and drinks for the reception, and the mother of the groom was wheeled into the room in her hospital bed, still unable to sit up after surgery. The father of the bride escorted his daughter down the makeshift aisle, and the two families celebrated a wedding, which was really a kind of combination wedding and funeral service.

Eleven days later the families gathered again for the funeral of the groom's mother. With overcast skies and a slight drizzle, they buried her body in a 212-year-old graveyard next to a Methodist church. My friend wrote about the occasion: "Within sheltered walls amid the grove of ancient oaks, hope pushed back the shroud of anxious fear provoked by mortal predicament. The goodness of

Gospel news was proclaimed again. The burial work of human hands does not exhaust the promise of Creation.”

### III

Where does such hope come from? I submit that it cannot come from the human realm. The stone can only be moved by the angel from above. The earthquake happens every time hope appears.

Many people at this time of year get a confused message about what Easter is all about. They think Easter is about believing that a dead body was resuscitated. But there is nothing about resuscitation in the Easter stories! In fact, none of the Easter accounts actually describe the resurrection itself. They only describe the discovery of the empty tomb and later appearances of Christ to those he loved. The gospel writers choose to leave the resurrection as the mystery it is. Resurrection faith, in other words, is a matter of worship, not a matter of analysis. Resurrection faith does not even exclude doubt; rather, it embraces our doubts! Even some of the witnesses to the empty tomb doubted, but they were still taken in as part of the family of faith!<sup>2</sup>

What is clear in all the stories of the resurrection is that they were rocked by the presence of Christ. Rocked...in the sense of being shaken up by the reality that they are not alone in this world, that they do not have to face that great stone of death alone or without access to the one power that can move that great stone.

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 28: 17.

Those women came to the cemetery intending to pay their respects. Think of that! We pay our respects...not only to the deceased, but to death itself. That's what the women were doing. Just one more episode of succumbing to the inevitable.

But then the writer of the gospel of Matthew describes reality as the earth shaking, the ground heaving beneath them, an angel appearing, the stone being rolled away, and Caesar's soldiers passing out in fear. Then the angel, in a kind of final act of impudent defiance of death (like some celestial Peter Pan!), sits perched on top of the rock and says to the women: *Don't be afraid. You are looking for Jesus? He is not here!*<sup>3</sup>

That may not be the reality of analysis, but it is the reality of experience, and it is certainly the reality of worship.

#### IV

Earthquakes, as we have witnessed again in Japan, are devastating. But sometimes an earthquake reveals something priceless. As a result of an earthquake in China years ago, a huge boulder was dislodged from a mountain exposing a cave full of wonderful artifacts a thousand years old. A whole new world became visible through those artifacts.

Those who are rocked by the resurrection have seen a whole new world exposed. It is a world in which death speaks, but no longer has the last word, a

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28: 5-6.

world where injustice is made right, a world of hope. That is what we are celebrating on Easter Day! If you have been shaken by death, I invite you to be rocked by resurrection, and to look wide-eyed beyond that stone to see...a whole new world!