

1 Corinthians 15:12-22, 50-58

Matthew 28:1-10

April 1, 2018

Easter Sunday/Day of Resurrection

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

AN EASTER EARTHQUAKE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Suddenly there was a great earthquake that Easter.

It lasted one minute, twenty-nine seconds and registered 7.2 – 7.8 on the Richter Scale and 7.2 on the moment magnitude scale, which is used to measure very large earthquakes.

It was the second largest earthquake in the area's history. By early the next morning, there had been more than 100 aftershocks.

Sides were ripped off buildings, roads were cracked, fires broke out, landslides occurred, a main aqueduct was damaged, and people were injured.

It was the 2010 Easter Earthquake on the California – Baja California border. The quake occurred at 3:40 p.m. Pacific Daylight Time on Sunday, April 4. The shockwaves were felt throughout the Western United States, some southern states, and in northwest Mexico. According to United States Geological Survey seismologist Dr. Lucy Jones, at least 20 million people in the United States and Mexico, including most of southern California, felt the impact of the earthquake.¹

In early November 2012, at the Annual Meeting and Exposition of the Geological Society of America in Charlotte, North Carolina, Steven A. Austin of Cedarville University in Ohio made a presentation entitled "Jerusalem Earthquake of 33 A.D.: Evidence within Laminated Mud of the Dead Sea, Israel." According to the presentation abstract, "Two thousand years ago the Dead Sea Basin was shaken by two earthquakes that left two widespread seismites within laminated Dead Sea sediment." The first earthquake happened in 31 B.C. Based on the sediment evidence, scientists have assigned the second earthquake a date of 31 A.D., +/- five years. Interestingly, the abstract comments, "but history specifies as 33 A.D."

The brief presentation abstract is full of scientific language and data that point to the epicenter of the 33 A.D. earthquake being near Jerusalem. What I found most interesting in this abstract was the author's inclusion of references to the gospel writer Matthew who describes two earthquakes occurring, one at Jesus' crucifixion on Friday and one on Sunday morning. The final lines of the presentation abstract say, "The persistent 33 A.D. seimite indicates the biggest 33 A.D. earthquake was M~ 6.0. This biggest earthquake was likely April 3, 33 A.D. that startled city residents and caused moderate damage, especially to the western side of Temple Mount. Pivots of two, 20-m-high, metal doors of the Temple appear to have been damaged, and the 20-m-high curtain in front of the doors was torn, likely by displacement of the lintel of the Temple during the earthquake."²

Steven Austin isn't the only scholar to investigate the Dead Sea earthquakes of 31 B.C. and 33 A.D. Geologist Jefferson Williams of Supersonic Geophysical and his colleagues Markus Schwab and Achim Brauer of the German Research Center for Geosciences analyzed the Dead Sea earthquake data and concluded the second quake could be the one mentioned in Matthew's crucifixion story. However, in an article in the *International Geological Review*, they wrote, "the earthquake implied in the gospel could be allegorical, referring to the earthquake that occurred sometime before or after the crucifixion. This earthquake would have been powerful enough to break apart the sediments of Ein Gedi but not enough to have warranted 'a still extant and extra-biblical historical record.' If the last possibility is true, this would mean that the report of an earthquake in the Gospel of Matthew is a type of allegory."³

Don't get me wrong! I'm not trying to make the case that the truth of Matthew's gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection from the dead depends on seismic and geological data. That would be no more convincing than saying that the empty tomb "proves" that Jesus was raised from the dead. Still, it's pretty interesting to read about the scientific investigations of the earthquakes in the Dead Sea area around the time Jesus died and was raised from the dead. Unfortunately, other than in the presentation abstract, I didn't find any other reports of damage estimates or how many people were affected by the earthquakes, especially the Easter earthquake that Matthew describes.

Matthew doesn't write a geological presentation abstract for peer review. He doesn't tell us the magnitude of the earthquake. Instead, he writes, "And behold, a great earthquake happened; an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it." (Matthew 28:2). Just a few verses earlier, at the end of chapter 27, when Jesus breathed his last on the cross, Matthew describes how "at that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split." Then Matthew adds this interesting note to his story, "Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (Matthew 27:51, 54)

What you can't easily see or hear in our English translation is that the Greek word for "earthquake" is σεισμός (seismos), from which we get our words "seismic" and "seismology." When Matthew describes the Easter earthquake when the angel of the Lord descended, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it, he also tells us what happened to the guards who were there: "For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men." Actually what Matthew tells us is, the guards were "shaken" or "earthquaked." And isn't it fascinating that the Easter earthquake that reveals that Jesus is alive shakes up the guards so much that they become like dead men? Life and death . . .

We speak of a "seismic" event and we can mean that in at least two different ways. Obviously, there is the scientific meaning – "of, subject to, caused by an earthquake; of or relating to an earth vibration; caused by something else such as an explosion or the impact of a meteorite." Studies of sediment strata near and around the Dead Sea indicate such a seismic event around 33 A.D.

But we can also speak of a “seismic” event as one that has “a strong or widespread impact; earthshaking seismic social changes.” Think about some synonyms for “seismic” – earthshattering; groundbreaking; profound; tumultuous. And isn’t that an accurate and wonderful description of the Easter earthquake that we are celebrating today?

Matthew tells us, “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And **suddenly** there was a great earthquake . . .” A few verses later, after the women had heard the good news from the angel, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **Suddenly** Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’” **Suddenly** there was a great earthquake . . . **Suddenly** Jesus met them . As one commentator puts it, “To meet Jesus is for the ground to move beneath you. Nothing remains as it was.”⁴ It has been said that the earth quaked when Jesus died on Friday because it was “shuddering under the awesomeness of what just happened.” How much more true that is when he was raised on Sunday, that earthshattering, groundbreaking, profound, and tumultuous victory over death!

In the aftermath of a great earthquake, news reports don’t usually have much good news, except maybe for the miraculous rescue of people trapped in the debris. Usually the stories are about massive destruction and suffering. Quite literally and in many other ways, the people who go through the earthquake have their worlds turned upside down.

The immediate report about this Easter earthquake certainly describes a world turned upside down, but the report is good news.

The tomb is blocked by a stone,

but the stone is rolled away.

The women arrive still in the dark,

but the angel’s glory fills them with light.

The women go to see the tomb,

but he is not there.

The women look for Jesus who was crucified,

but he has been raised.

There is every reason to be afraid,

but the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

The women run away with fear and great joy,

but meet Jesus who says, “Do not be afraid.”

Despite the studies done by Supersonic Geophysical and the German Research Center for Geosciences and the Geological Society of America, we don’t have any reports of how many people were affected by the earthquake(s) of 33 A.D. near the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. But that earthquake, just like the 2010 Easter Earthquake in Baja California, was localized, even if that meant a big area and lots of people.

But the fact that we are here this Easter morning to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead means **that** Easter Earthquake has had an earthshattering, groundbreaking, profound, and tumultuous effect felt around the world and down through the centuries. That Easter Earthquake means that our celebration today is so much more than welcoming spring’s warmer weather and enjoying more daylight

hours. Today's Easter celebration is so much more than some vague hope that maybe, just maybe things might get better. Today's Easter celebration is so much more than just a private assurance and satisfaction that I'm gonna go to heaven some day.

What we celebrate this Easter Sunday – the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead and God has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ – is a seismic event, an earth-shattering event, a groundbreaking event, a profound event, a tumultuous event. Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead should shake us to our very core and turn our world upside down.

I know this might sound strange, but as I was writing this sermon, I kept hearing Carole King in my head, singing, "I feel the earth move under my feet . . ." I'm sure she wrote that as a love song in which she describes the effect her darling had on her. But bear with me for a minute, and think about those opening words: "I feel the earth move under my feet, I feel the sky tumbling down. I feel my heart start to trembling Whenever you're around . . ."

More than bunnies and baskets. More than ham and eggs. More than bonnets and lilies. More than chocolate and egg hunts. More than warmer days and pretty flowers. More than wishful thinking or individual hopes. More than majestic music and new clothes.

The Easter Earthquake brings life and joy and hope and peace and power and courage and tumult and marching orders and opportunities . . .

Suddenly, nothing is the same as it was!

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Let us pray: Gracious God, we praise you for the light of new life made possible through Jesus Christ, our risen Savior. We praise you for the light of life that shone on that first Easter. We praise you for the light of new life that continues to shine in our hearts today. We pray that the Easter light of life, hope, and joy will live in us each day, and that we will be bearers of that light into the lives of others. Amen.

NOTES

¹2010 Baja California earthquake at www.en.m.wikipedia.org.

²Steven A. Austin, "Jerusalem Earthquake of 33 A.D.: Evidence Within Laminated Mud of the Dead Sea, Israel," 2012 GSA Annual Meeting & Exposition, 4-7 November 2012 at www.gsa.confex.com.

³Samreen Hooda, "Jesus' Crucifixion Date Possibly Friday April 3, 33 A.D., According to Earthquake Study," May 25, 2012 at www.huffingtonpost.com.

⁴Melinda Quivik, "Commentary on Matthew 28:1-10," www.workingpreacher.org.