

“Terrifying, Beautiful Grace”  
Matthew 28:1-10  
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ  
Cottage Grove, Minnesota  
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Easter Sunday  
Sunrise Service

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On March 11, 2011 a massive earthquake shook the coast of Japan. The earthquake alone destroyed millions of homes and thousands of lives. Combined with the tsunami that followed, the devastation was unimaginable. We may not know for decades all the damage that was done, as it will take that long for humans and animals to recover from the trauma.

One such traumatized family had given birth to a baby girl about four months before the earthquake. The young mother and father survived both the quake and the tsunami...but their infant daughter slipped out of their arms and was, they thought, lost forever. There was *no way* she could have survived the natural disaster. She was tiny and unable to fend for herself even in the *calmest* circumstances. She was a growing infant and needed to eat on a schedule. She was buried beneath mounds of rubble. *She was gone.*

The young parents, in shock from their own experience and their loss, had only just begun to grieve their daughter. They had only just begun to realize that their beautiful baby girl, who was the love of their lives, would never take her first steps, or speak her first words, or go to school, or have a career, or get married. She had slipped from their arms, and now their hope, *their very life* was gone.

I imagine their experience was not unlike that of the two Marys who went to the tomb after Jesus' death. The *one person in the world* who had given them hope, the man they loved beyond life itself, was gone! Just days after his violent death, their grief had only begun to take hold. They – the young parents and the two Marys – were in a state of shock, unable to think or barely to breathe.

And yet, for the two Marys and for the parents of the perfect four-month-old baby girl, the hope that they thought was gone forever had just taken a brief break. The darkness that they thought would be their entire future was merely a dark *spot* in a long and hopeful life.

More than 72 hours after the earthquake and tsunami, rescuers heard tiny cries from beneath the rubble when they were searching for the dead. At first they thought they were hearing things, but then the cries came again. Very carefully they removed layer after layer of debris...and beneath the rubble lay the baby girl, alive and unharmed. *Somehow* this child, who was probably accustomed to being fed every couple of hours, had survived for 72 hours with neither food nor water. She had survived in a tiny air pocket beneath hundreds of pounds of debris. She who was lost had been found!

And what of the grief-stricken women at the tomb? They arrived, only to be shaken to the core by what Matthew tells us was a “great earthquake.” I imagine the women, already in shock, barely comprehending what was taking place as the ground shook and opened up beneath their feet. However, *this* earthquake was not the bearer of destruction and death. Instead, it was a harbinger of hope, in the form of an angel whose “appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.”

Understandably, the women were more terrified than joyful when this angel announced himself in such a manner...and proceeded to tell them that their Jesus, the man they loved beyond words, was no longer in the tomb but had been raised.

How would *you* feel if you went to the cemetery to visit the grave of a recently deceased loved one, only to be shaken by an earthquake and accosted by an angel “whose appearance was like lightning,” then told that your loved one was gone? Probably about the way the women felt – confused, scared enough to have a heart attack, and *joyful beyond belief*.

The story, as we know, does not end here. The angel calms the fears of the shocked women and then commissions them – the first witnesses to the resurrection – to go and tell his disciples. But as they are on their way there, they are stopped by *Jesus himself*, healthy and friendly. *Only now* does this shocking turn of events begin to really sink in, as they worship at his feet.

Two barely believable miracle stories. A newborn child goes without food and water for 72 hours, hidden beneath the rubble of an earthquake, yet she is found alive and well. I may not have believed this story unless I saw the picture of the perfect child wearing a pink snowsuit, held gently in the arms of a dirty, rough-looking soldier.

A spiritual leader is brutally assassinated on a cross, in front of witnesses, yet he shows up alive and well, after an angel that looks like lightning announces his resurrection following another great earthquake.

There are no photographs to confirm *this* unlikely story, and the only documentation we have of it is two thousand years old. Nonetheless, I believe it. Why? I can't tell you, exactly, except to say that I have faith; that is, I trust the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. I don't know if things happened literally the way the Gospel of Matthew tells it. At our next service we will hear a *different* account of the Resurrection, and I don't know which one, if either, tells things *exactly* as they were. But *that is not the point*. The point is that I know that Jesus is raised from the dead, that death is not the last word, that hope trumps destruction and despair. I know that grace exists, terrifying and beautiful, because I have seen it. Christ the Lord is risen today! Praise God!

*Now let us pray.*