

**SEISMIC SHIFT; MATTHEW 28:1-10; EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2017;
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Did you notice the anti-crescendo in today's story of the resurrection? Morning dawns, the two Marys go to the tomb. There is a great earthquake; an angel of the Lord descends from heaven, rolls back the stone at the tomb and stands on it. He is as white as lightning, his clothes as white as snow. The guards quake and act like dead men. The angel tells the women Jesus has been raised, to go and tell the disciples, and then to go to Galilee.

But as they go, Matthew writes, suddenly Jesus meets them and says "Rejoice!" They fall down to worship him and he repeats the message of the angel.

Did you catch it that time? The anti-crescendo is Jesus; the Risen Christ. Clearly the angel gets more attention, more drama, than the Risen Christ; even the guards get to quake for fear and act like dead men. But Jesus? He just appears only to repeat someone else's lines.

I have an old high school friend with whom I correspond by email. He is an orthodox Jew. Once in a while we discuss things religious. Whenever he writes the name of God he does so as many Jews do: G_d. He believes the name that is above every name is so holy, so mysterious and revered that any person who has the slightest notion of the grandeur and power of God would not presume to even write or say the name.

Contrast that with the popular texting acronym OMG. Or the television preacher who says Jesus with three syllables in a complete sentence; or the obscenity-laced holy epithets that fill the air waves, cyber-space and everyday speech on the lips of all ages, walks and circumstances of life.

Who would you turn to, to learn more about God, to discover God's hiding place, to petition on your behalf an audience with the Almighty? Someone for whom the name is as common as a conjunction or someone who does not dare to utter the name for fear of disrespect, presumptuous piety or simply being struck dead?

Despite the brass, despite the lilies, despite the Sunday best in which we are attired Matthew approaches the Easter event with restraint and fear; fear informed not so much for safety but awe and wonder; like the discovery of a new world regardless of our ability to rationally explain it.

Poets refer to this as "negative capability" first introduced by John Keats who by his early twenties was already in the grip of the tuberculosis that would claim him at twenty-six; and so Keats was still and listened, kept his eye on the waking dawn and the fading twilight and discovered more of the splendor of earth and humanity than most of the poets writing in English since.

It was the birthday of Samuel Beckett last week, the playwright who transformed modern drama with his play *Waiting for Godot*. It is never stated in the play and Beckett himself claims not to know or he would have told us, just who Godot is. But the searing questions of the two characters, why are we here? and what is our purpose? are directed at a Being bigger than us, mysterious, beyond rational capacity.

What exactly is Matthew up to? Like a good historian he wants to make a coherent whole of the fragments of Mark's Gospel – the earliest source of information about Jesus that Matthew and the other gospels depended upon; but like a good poet he takes Mark's restrained, awestruck utterances of Jesus' life seriously, especially the terrified, halting response to resurrection when Mark says, "they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone."

It might not have been the best way to recruit new members for an upstart church; so later redactors of Mark's Gospel tacked on what are called the 'shorter' and 'longer' endings of the Gospel both of which conclude like Hallmark movies as the camera fades and the credits roll. The longer ending merely provides more comfort food and puppies.

Why the scary ending eclipsed by two versions of *It's a wonderful life?* 'Domesticated' might be a word. Even the early church had this impulse to bring God down to size; to make God accessible (as if Jesus didn't accomplish that) to take what Rudolf Otto, the German scholar of comparative religion called, "the *mysterium tremendum*" out of the holy.

But for his part, Matthew still gets goose bumps when he reads Mark's account of the resurrection; and though his gospel fills in more of the details of Jesus' life he retains Mark's restraint.

Despite his readiness to paint the angel with the vivid colors of apocalypse, Matthew refrains from giving a verbal portrayal of the risen Messiah. The mystery must not be trivialized by idle words.

This awe and restraint testifies that the resurrection is not a carefully constructed myth but simply an inexplicable event. The story is credible only because God is credible.

I remember the first time I saw the Grand Canyon; a friend and I were camping across the country between the end of our sophomore year of college and summer jobs; it was June, we had driven all day to get to Flagstaff on the south rim of the canyon but didn't quite make it; so we camped out about fifty miles from Flagstaff.

The next day when we arrived at the visitors' center, got out of the car and walked up to an overlook all we could do was make muted sounds of awe, there were no words, just stunned silence in front of that vast, deep, multi-layered, unending, earth-toned void in the earth.

There must be poetry or maybe Aaron Copeland composed something but really, we didn't want to reduce the power, the impact, the unfathomable grandeur of that natural wonder to each other or to our families when we got back to Pittsburgh. So we just shook our heads, smiled and said, "Geez!" That's what we have in Matthew and each of the gospels: restraint, silence, terror. Yes, there is joy, but that comes later. The first human response to the Risen Christ is fear. Those guards posted at the tomb? Fred Buechner says they weren't there to protect against someone stealing the body, that was a lie they told Pilate; what the religious authorities were really afraid of and what paralyzed the guards is that Jesus did rise from dead just like he said.

You see, the one thing the gospel writers and the religious authorities have in common; the one thing we have in common with them and with the first readers of the gospels is what Tom Troeger says every human being does – we construct our world out of solid meanings.

We do it in lots of ways – we create meaning with the people we love, a lifetime partner, our family, our friends; we give ourselves to a career, a vocation, a calling that provides a sense of purpose and direction; or we join an organization whose mission strikes us as truly worthy.

But sooner or later every solid world of meaning folds, crumbles; those we love die; the job disappears or shrinks in its purpose; or the cause or organization goes off in another direction.

But there is one solid meaning that never folds -- death. Some people put taxes in the same category – there may be some truth to that, yet now that April 15 is behind us we don't have to worry about taxes for another year. But what if *death* is something we no longer have to worry about?

It's really pretty simple; if death is no longer the absolute boundary we thought it was, then the dogmatic religion Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin spent their careers overseeing and enforcing might not have the ironclad power and control the people and guarantee their privilege and authority. Death organizes our world. It brings tears and grief and sorrow but we know that the world we live and operate in is a world where we can count on death. But if death, the great leveler, the one certainty is overcome by God in the resurrection then what about racial prejudice? Or war in the Middle East? Or children living in poverty? Or partisan gridlock in Congress?

Resurrection takes us to the new world where death folds and all the solid meanings that are obstacles to life fall with it: despair, illness, bigotry, hate. The consequence is we have no reason or excuse to prevent us from working for a world of justice; because if death is overturned anything that stands in the way of reconciliation and peace can be overturned.

Someone commenting on this text makes a good point: it's not we who've been changed by the resurrection as much as it is the boundaries of the world.

Matthew makes the point by introducing two earthquakes – one at the crucifixion when the holy of holies in the Temple, representing the dogmatic religion, was destroyed; and an earthquake at the resurrection when the angel appears and breaks the seal of the tomb; you see, it is the spiritual landscape that was overturned by an off-the-Richter-scale upheaval.

The question for us, now, is will we choose to live in the new world liberated from death or the old one where death still reigns. What would such a life look like? Matthew shows us. His use of the women to discover and announce resurrection is a sign of the new world. Women in ancient courts were not considered credible witnesses. But Matthew and the early church said we're living in a different world with a new order of relationships.

Just in the past week I've seen people exploring the new landscape where death no longer reigns: I witnessed years of sibling animosity melt away because one sibling chose to leave the old world for the new.

A long time member of this congregation told me, in a quiet aside, he is about to become a 1,000 day volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. Ten years ago he heard what seemed like an intractable need for affordable housing for hard-working families in our city. "I work with people who've given a lot more time than I have," he said. "I think we've had some impact,"

Yesterday, I heard the sister of a young woman who was hit by a car as she crossed the street and was killed less than a month ago. The younger sister told us stories about their growing up together, their loving relationship as adults, and then she said, 'My sister would want us, I want us to remember her with joy; to remember where she is now in the company of heaven.' And I thought of those words of Paul to the martyred church in Rome under the thumb of Nero, "O death where is they sting?"

We have a lot of living to do in the new world of resurrection. Division and danger threaten our nation and a war-torn world.

Our city is in transformation. What kind of new Buffalo do we want to create? We can continue to accept the old boundaries of race and class and opportunity and public education or we can remember those old barriers of prejudice and privilege don't have to reign over us and prevent Buffalo from becoming a life-affirming, equal opportunity community.

Thank goodness Matthew, the gospel writer, didn't give us some charming Matthew McConaughey or rugged Denzel Washington. All he could say is Jesus was raised. When the Creator of life confronts you there aren't any more words.

So sing the hymns, feast your eyes on the lilies, delight in the brass;
but then go home, keep watch and listen –
in some dark corner of your life where the dawn is about to break he
is waiting to greet you with one word: "Rejoice!" Amen.