

Faith Mennonite Church
Easter - April 20, 2014
Joetta Schlabach

After the quake: Do not be afraid!

Psalm 118:1-2, 14, 17, 21-24; Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:14

On Friday, I spent some time at the piano singing the hymns of the cross and Jesus' death that are in our hymnal. I was taken with the music of a hymn that Sandy Westby and Karen Wiebe had played on piano and viola as we washed feet on Thursday night. I was equally moved by the beautiful poetry of the lyrics, set to that tune, penned by Carl P. Daw, Jr., which so beautifully captures the passion to resurrection panorama.

How shallow former shadows seem beside the great reverse,
as darkness swallows up the light of all the universe.
Creation shivers at the shock, the temple rends its veil.
A pallid stillness stifles time and nature's motions fail.

This is no midday fantasy, no flight of fevered brain.
With vengeance awful, grim, and real, chaos is come again.
The hands that formed us from the soil are nailed upon the cross.
The Word that gave us life and breath expires in utter loss.

Yet deep within this darkness lives a Love so fierce and free,
that arcs all voids and—risk supreme!—embraces agony.
Its perfect testament is etched in iron, blood, and wood.
With awe we glimpse its true import and dare to call it good.

Today, brothers and sisters, we do the foolish. We look at this cross that hangs at the front of our sanctuary and with awe we glimpse its true import and dare to call it good. We celebrate the profound mystery that the One who we worship as creator of the universe, one who is beyond and outside of creation, became one with creation, one with humanity, taking that risk supreme of embracing agony, of dying as painful and humiliating a death as any can imagine, of becoming fully human to the point of experiencing utter loss.

But it wasn't defeat; it was not loss. No, it was love fierce and free. Love that engenders hope. Love that God brought back to life on the third day, the day we celebrate today as Easter, the day of resurrection.

Last Sunday as we read the account of Jesus' passion and death in the gospel of Matthew, we heard that the earth quaked as Jesus breathed his last. And this morning we heard again of the quaking earth in Matthew's account of the resurrection. Each gospel writer recounts the resurrection with slightly different details and emphases. How does one capture and remember such an unexpected, inexplicable event? Matthew's gospel connects Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, not only with the story of God as understood in the history of the people of Israel, but with the very story of the cosmos. At Jesus birth, a star appears more brightly and at his death and resurrection the very earth quakes.

I've never experienced a full-force earthquake, but I did experience some tremors when Gerald and I lived in Central America in the 1980s. The first was when I was pregnant with our first child. We were in Guatemala where our Mennonite Central Committee colleagues, serving throughout Central America, had gathered for a retreat. One night, soon after going to bed on the upper level of a two-story, concrete hotel, the building began to rock. Fortunately, it only rocked and did not collapse. MCC friends who had taken a

late night walk down to the nearby volcanic lake, Atitlan, and were out on a dock, experienced a mini tsunami as a large wave crossed the lake. We all knew fear that evening.

Several months later, back in Nicaragua where we were living, and during the first week of our son's life, I vividly remember a less-powerful tremor that brought a seismic reaction. The tremor was only visible in the slight shaking of the ceiling light fixture, but that small movement brought our house worker and friend, Angela, to an abrupt stop as she swept the floor in the bedroom where I was resting. She froze as she saw the movement and looked stricken as her body recalled the massive earthquake that had occurred 12 years earlier. After a moment she regained her composure and then poured out her story of the shock, the fear, the horrors of the devastation of that quake that obliterated the entire center of the city of Managua.

Beyond the initial fear, the story continued ... of people working together to find victims and build make-shift coffins in which to bury them, and then the slow, arduous work of rebuilding neighborhoods and communities.

The recovery process revealed in an accentuated way the extreme corruption and brutality of ruling dictator Somoza, whose family and national guard had ruled and amassed great fortune over several decades. That revelation hastened another “earthquake”—this one created by humans—of an uprising to topple his regime. In the wake of the first earthquake a Christian agency, CEPAD, sprang up to help channel international aid that came to the country. It continued to work and to grow during the ensuing civil war. Now forty-two years later CEPAD lives on, still working and adapting to new realities as it builds hope and bring life to communities recovering from generations of poverty, and the trauma of war and family violence. And Angela, and the women (and men!) of the Mennonite Church in a Managua neighborhood, like the Marys at the tomb, continue to faithfully follow and live in hope amidst continuing poverty and struggle. Today, they are proclaiming with us that Christ is risen!

Matthew's story of the resurrection provides two contrasting responses to the earthquake. The soldiers who were guarding the tomb fainted with fear. They represented the powers of control, of death, of trying to keep Jesus and the saving love of God and the justice of God's kingdom, safely shackled in the tomb. The earthquake broke that control and the guards lay helpless.

On the other hand the Jewish women represented powerlessness. Jewish in a Roman-occupied country; female in a patriarchal society that did not always take women or their word seriously. Although, one man had, and in response they had followed him faithfully, in spite of their fear, to the cross and to the tomb.

They too experienced fear at the quaking earth, but they did not faint. Their fear was mixed with joy as they saw the visionary messenger that said “Do not be afraid; come and see!” the empty tomb, and then “Go tell the disciples!” for Jesus is on the move again going before you to Galilee—that place of familiarity where he had taught and healed and proclaimed God's kingdom of love, of mercy, of justice for the poor, of judgment for those who oppress.

Following those instructions, the women left the faint guards behind and ran head-on into the risen Lord. Their fear and joy merged into worship as they kneeled and touched his feet. Jesus' word was the same as the angel's: “Do not be afraid...go and tell my brother to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The message of the resurrection is that simple: Do not be afraid ... go to Galilee ... go to Seward, and Longfellow, and Powderhorn, and Kingfield, and Nokomis, and Uptown, and Richfield, and North Minneapolis, and St. Anthony Park, and Merriam Park, and Selby-Dale, and Excelsior, and Northfield, and Osseo ... go and say and do the things that Jesus taught...binding up wounds, proclaiming liberation, offering God's forgiveness, feeding the hungry, sharing hope.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The cross is stripped of the power of death by that “Love so fierce and free.” This is our faith. This is our hope. Receive, believe, and live the good news!