

Synod Assembly Worship – April 25, 2026

Matthew 28:1-10

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, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” The gospel of our Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, grace, peace, and mercy are yours through our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen

Have any of you ever felt the shaking of the earth in an earthquake? I remember the first time I did. I had just moved to Massachusetts, and this Iowa girl had never experienced an earthquake before. In November of 1980, a small magnitude 2.9 earthquake occurred in the Chelmsford-Lowell area, and we felt a rumble on the ground and a rattling of windows. It was really nothing, but nonetheless, it took me by surprise! A few years later when my husband and I were living in upstate New York, we felt a much larger shake. Just after six in the morning, a 5.2 magnitude quake located in the Adirondack Mountains awoke us to rumbles, a swaying bed, and clattering dishes. Now that was something! And most recently, on a trip to the San Francisco Bay area just last year, a 3.9 magnitude earthquake struck in the next town from where we were staying. That’s my history with earthquakes – unsettling and moving as they are!

In the Easter story told in the gospel of Matthew, we hear that “*suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.*” “Earthquake” is an interesting word in Greek - *seismos* from *seio* (to shake, move, or quake to and fro; also used metaphorically - to create agitation, fear, a commotion, a shaking. The root of this word is where “seismic” comes from.

It is not a quiet Easter morning in Matthew’s gospel. No one is speaking, “Good news! Christ is risen!” No. For Matthew, this is earth-shaking news, surprising news. The gospel of Matthew doesn’t tell us why the two Marys went to Jesus’ tomb that first Easter morning. In their shock, maybe they were hoping against hope to find some kind of “undo” button so things would be right in the world again.

However, they knew full well there was nothing they could undo what had been done. Jesus, their friend and Lord was dead – crucified, humiliated. They saw it all. They *thought* they knew what to expect going forward. They expected that at the tomb, both an impossibly heavy stone and the certainty of death would separate them from Jesus forever. They expected to grieve. They expected to find some semblance of solace, knowing he had been given a proper burial.

But then just as the earth quaked when Jesus breathed his last on the cross on Friday, the earth shook again that morning. And rather than a sealed tomb shrouded in death, they found a messenger of God presiding over a pair of petrified Roman soldiers who had just been shaken violently. And they found an open tomb, brimming with unexpected life.

God had undone all their expectations, but not their experience. There was no going back to what was before. Death HAD happened. This was something completely new. The empty tomb was evidence of an emerging reality, as if to tell them, and us, “this is just the beginning!”

Matthew makes sure we don’t miss the significance of both this death and this resurrection. It’s no accident. It’s nothing normal. The resurrection is earth shaking, disorienting news. In the other gospels, the tomb was already open when the women arrive, but in Matthew’s gospel, the earth shook and one strong angel rolls back the stone as the women look on. Jesus is gone; apparently, the stone was no obstacle. The angel sits on the stone, crossing his angelic arms, and glances over at the security guards – only Matthew mentions these guards – who are frozen in fear.

Do you see the irony: the living look dead and the dead are alive. The angel doesn’t speak to the guards. His assurances are only for the women: “Do not be afraid - Jesus has been raised, just as he said he would.” The angel then says, “Go tell the disciples. Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee.” The women take off and run right into risen Jesus. In awe and surprise, they grab onto him and Jesus echoes the angel: “You have nothing to fear. Go tell my brothers and sisters I’ll meet them in Galilee.”

The resurrection wasn’t just shocking; it was scandalous. The women go and tell the disciples, and they just kept going and telling – because here we are over 2000 years later.

But I ask you this - are we remembering an old story about people walking the path and seeing an empty tomb? And a road that led to a risen Christ that was long, long ago? Or is it more than that?

Our Easter Hope is in the present tense. Think about the words of our faith – the words of scripture and the words of our liturgy. In Genesis, God **speaks** (present tense) the world into being. On Christmas Eve, with candles in a dark sanctuary, we sing - *Silent Night, Holy Night. All **is** calm, all **is** bright.... Christ the Savior **is** born.... Not Christ the Savior **was** born.* And in Holy Communion, Jesus is quoted as saying, “*This **is** my body, this **is** my life given for you.* Present tense. *Jesus Christ **IS** Risen Today* - Not *Jesus **was** raised in the past.* We do not only remember; **we participate**. The eternal God speaks to us, here and now.

Hope comes in the present tense. The resurrection invites us to be present now, to look at the roads we have traveled and how we might see our current path, a framing of communal hope, transforming our inner life and a voice of hope for others we meet on the road.

Resurrection isn't pretending that death isn't real. Here is the truth. On that first Easter, the angel is letting the women know death isn't the ending they thought it was. Life after death isn't a return to exactly what was before. Jesus doesn't move back into his house and get back into his routine with the disciples. There were accounts of people encountering Jesus after the resurrection, but it sometimes takes a minute for them to recognize him.

Even Jesus is changed by death. Resurrection was a surprise and it changed people.

The new life of resurrection isn't a return of what we've known before. **Life after death is different.** New life, a new creation after death, leaving the empty tomb, can be hard and disorienting. The earth, our foundations, shook and things were not the same. Are we standing by an empty tomb but not sure what is next?

I imagine most of us have not had a literal conversation with an angel, but I do know what it feels like when an earthquake, literally or metaphorically, rocks your world. And things are not what you thought they were.

When the dead aren't in their tombs, when the lab test comes back with bad news, when death and grief and despair and fear threaten to overtake us.

I know many people who are facing tombs right now - tombs of tumors and cancer, tombs of addiction or anxiety, tombs of loss. Or tombs caused by political malice, politicians denying care and safety to people, tombs of violence and hate. Tombs of worry about the future of our congregation's life as we remember it in the past. We may feel stuck.

Can Jesus, raised from the dead, change me? Change us?

Our Easter hope doesn't celebrate that one man rose from the dead. Our **Easter Hope celebrates new life – a new creation for all of us.** For all of us, **now**.

Jesus was just the first, but all humanity can rise from what is deadly – deadly to us, and deadly to our whole world. Not sometime in the future, but **now**.

Maybe in the Easter story, the deeper truth is that Jesus was raised and lives on as the Christ (Richard Rohr uses the terms "Universal Christ") and we and all humanity is part of that. Brian McClaren offers this image – "Easter points to Humanity 2.0, we might say. Resurrection invites us to join him in Humanity 2.0, in "resurrection life." Resurrection life says, "You don't have to wait for some distant future to start practicing compassion, empathy, nonviolence, reconciliation, reverence, joy, hope, and peace. You can leave the old humanity behind and start practicing Humanity 2.0 **now**." We can join the resurrection, now, in the present. We can rise. **Now**.

The angel told the women, “He is not here; he has risen.”

“Did it happen?” is the wrong question. The right question is, “Is it happening?” The promise of the resurrection is not simply what God has done, but what God is still doing.

We long for clarity and certainty, and when we cannot see the whole picture, we can become impatient, reactive, even fearful. We cling to what feels familiar and safe, and in doing so, we sometimes miss the new thing – the new creation that God is doing right in front of us.

By Christ’s resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, Easter meets us in these difficult, dead-end places and points to new life, new ways, new hope – a new creation that we didn’t know was possible before seeing the empty tomb. To live in resurrection life and hope, we’re not undoing what has been done, we’re seeing our lives in new light and as a new creation - looking for ways forward where we didn’t think possible before, and knowing we never do this alone because Christ has gone ahead of us – and goes with us.

Like the women at the tomb, who went back to tell their friends, we’re called to tell people about this love that is stronger than death. Like the women at the tomb, we want people to know that what looks like an ending for us does not mean God is finished creating new life.

Friends in Christ, I invite you to notice when the death and pain of the world make you forget to leave the tomb, when your imagination forgets to believe impossible things, when your heart protects itself from the possibility of life after it has known death. In these days - especially in these days, the world needs to know the depth, and height, and breadth of God’s love.

So, leave the tombs to share the remarkable news that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not even death. A new creation is everything! Alleluia! Christ *is* risen. (Christ is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!) AMEN