

A Gospel of Earthquakes

Preached by the Revd Rob Gilbert on Easter Sunday 20 April 2014 10.00 am at St Peter's, Wolvercote.

Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 28:1-10.

Matthew's Gospel is a gospel of earthquakes. In it, Jesus's teaching is an earthquake that transforms our understanding of the law, of what it is to live a good life. And Matthew's accounts of Jesus's death and of his resurrection which we celebrate this morning are accompanied by earthquakes. When Jesus dies, there is an earthquake so violent the graves of the dead break open; and in Matthew's account of the resurrection there is, we're told, a great earthquake when Jesus's tomb is opened and it's found that Jesus has been raised to eternal life.

The disciples were nobody's fool, they were as capable as ourselves, as objective as ourselves, as able to see fraud as ourselves. They were practical men and women. They'd been fishermen, or tax collectors like Matthew himself, or revolutionaries, or were former prostitutes, or well-connected ladies. The disciples had worked with the hard stuff of life, they had trod the road, they had had to fish all night, they had counted the cash. And they had scientific minds, like Thomas's scientific mind, minds that demanded evidence and weren't satisfied with hearsay.

The disciples were nobody's fool. When Jesus died they knew the game was up and that they had backed the wrong man. So how could it be that they came to be convinced that he had risen from death, and what's more that they had met him, spoken to him, *eaten* with him after his death? This was a complete inversion of their understanding of life, something totally new. Their life was torn apart by Jesus's death, it was left in tatters, and then – wonder of wonders – put back together again with a different meaning.

Jesus's death and resurrection were together an earthquake that put everything the disciples knew into disarray and showed them that under it all, under everything, there is a deeper truth, an eternal truth which underpins the whole of existence. A truth that, and it can be put very simply, gives life to the dead and brings into existence the things that do not exist. The earthquakes in Matthew speak of the seismic significance, the seismic *violence*, even, of what happened when Jesus rose from death.

What on earth could bring that about? Not just some terribly rich bit of symbolism. Not just a new and rather poetic understanding of life. Not just a splendidly clever philosophy. Not some magnificent metaphor. The resurrection is not a metaphor, however grand, and it's not poetry, however beautiful.

It's not something really, really meaningful but the basis of meaning itself. It's plain, unvarnished truth, stark fact. Jesus was dead and then he became alive in a new and transformed and eternal way, leaving an empty tomb. And he offers that eternal life to us.

One reason the resurrection is not just symbolic is that Christianity is anyway a faith in which *symbols* speak *directly* of what is *real*. The symbols in Christianity aren't just that – they aren't just symbols to jog our memory or remind us how we felt once upon a time or to stand for something else. The symbols in Christianity represent things that actually happened. The symbols in Christianity are dense and concrete. The cross reminds us of a death, the empty tomb that Jesus rose from death, and bread and wine that Jesus poured out his life for his friends and for us and is present with us now. Christianity is about actually receiving your sight, about actually not being lame any more, about water actually become wine. Christianity is not about tricks, and it's not symbolic. It's about reality, concrete reality, and how there's much more to reality than we usually realise.

So Christianity is not *just* about loving your enemies, although it is certainly partly that. And it is not *just* about serving the needs of others first, although it is certainly partly that. Nor is it *just* about finding the strength to carry on, though that can be important. And it's not about a metaphorical life after death which is the way things can turn out for the best in *this* world. Though that can be important too. It is about real, eternal life after real, concrete death – something impossible to define, but something we have to face up to. Something we are not in control of and can't be, something God can do and we cannot. Something shown us today in a man who was dead speaking with his friends and saying, "Mary!". Later, saying "Peter", saying "John", saying "Mother!", saying "Thomas!"

In our world, today, earthquakes come and they *are* disasters. Earthquakes are disasters and it gets worse, they can trigger tsunamis. In our world, today, people die because they are hungry. Or because they have a disease which could, actually, be treated. Or because they are just poor. In our world, today, tragedies come into our lives – sickness and accidents bring loss and grief. In our world planes disappear and ferries full of passengers sink. But the point of Jesus's death is that in him God shared in all this; and the point of Jesus's resurrection is that in Jesus God shows us that no disaster, however appalling, is the final word. Jesus's death was an appalling disaster – for him and for his disciples. But God made it so it wasn't the end of the story. No disaster however appalling is the final word because God has the final word. A name for that word is love, love stronger than death; it is a Word so strong that it inverts the whole order of our world, its seismic energy reconfigures our understanding of existence and reveals eternal life in the middle of everything.

In his death Jesus goes where we all go, you could say he shares our human catastrophe¹. As Mark said on Good Friday, in his death Jesus completes his incarnation, completes his humanity. The earthquake of his resurrection changes everything, for his disciples then and for us now. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary thought they had come to the tomb to face up to our common catastrophe. Instead they come face-to-face with eternal life. Amen.

¹ See Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* e.g. p108