Easter Sunday, March 31, 2002
**THE EASTER EARTHQUAKE**
Matthew 28:1-10

A young man from Nebraska was visiting the Grand Canyon for the first time in his life. The Grand Canyon is sometimes called the sixth wonder of the world. This young man stood on the rim of the canyon, which had been carved through millions of years of erosion by the force of the Colorado River. As happens with most people, especially those of us who live on the prairies, he was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the canyon. It left him speechless and nearly in tears. After a few minutes of silence brought on by the awe and wonder of the place, he turned to his friend and said, “Something must’ve happened here.”

That’s a good way to describe how many people experience Easter. Something unusual must’ve happened on that Sunday about 2,000 years ago, and it’s being remembered and celebrated all over the world today in thousands of churches.

But now let’s suppose that several strangers who had never heard the Easter story were walking by our church building this morning and decided to come in. I am convinced that they would be moved by the festive atmosphere of this holy place — the architecture, the incredible pipe organ, the choir, the brass, and the place filled to capacity. Let’s imagine that they would ask some of you what is happening here. How would you explain it to them? What would you say about the Easter story and what it means to you? If the visitors asked four worshipers, they would probably get four different explanations.

The Bible has four Easter stories. They are found in the first four books of the New Testament — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The overall story is the same, but the details vary. That should not surprise us. It happens all the time. Individuals or groups have a common experience, yet their subsequent attempts to explain that experience will vary.

It also happens within an individual. You’ve discovered, as I have, that there is frequently a difference between an experience of an unusual event and a subsequent attempt to understand and explain that experience. And as we continue to look back on it years later, our understanding of it may change.

So it is that each gospel writer uses different metaphors to describe what happened on Easter and his understanding of what happened. Matthew has one metaphor that the other three versions do not have. He describes the Easter event as being like a great earthquake. That’s a very good metaphor because an earthquake is something that shakes things up, rearranges the landscape, and topples buildings that we thought were permanent. That’s a good description of Easter. It’s also a good description of what happened to people when they first met Jesus.

Some of the first followers saw in him the face of God and heard the word of God. They were amazed, frightened, and even angered. He talked of a world that seemed upside down to them, but not to God, where what they treasured was not what God treasures, where what they thought was important was not what God thought was important. It caused a small earthquake within them.

Easter is a major earthquake. It tells us that heaven and earth are cracked open, and there are no spatial entities at all (up there, down here). Instead, they are together, all included in God’s

creation, spilling over into each other. The Easter earthquake also tells us that the ways of Caesar are always, in the long run, rejected in a cosmic “no,” and the ways of God are enthroned in a cosmic “yes.”

Easter is an earthquake because it demonstrated then and it demonstrates now that, in the long run, good triumphs over evil, love overcomes hate, truth over falsehood, and life over death. There is no situation, no circumstance, no sadness, no loss, no failure, no tragedy that can put us beyond the reach of God’s love.

Easter is also an earthquake because it exposes our idolatries. The first tremors of this earthquake were felt, but not recognized, when Jesus was betrayed for a handful of silver and was arrested on charges that no one could quite articulate. Then he was put on trial for the crime of blasphemy — for speaking as if he knew the mind of God, for undermining family values, and for exposing an established and lucrative religious franchise.

This “Jesus problem” was handled in good Roman fashion by the ultimate punishment, which we still want to rely on today — execute him. Get rid of the body; get rid of the problem. This is the oldest and most original form of idolatry — to try to solve our problems by killing, to worship the power of death rather than the power of life. Long before Jesus was killed, the Bible tells the story of Cain, who killed Abel because he was jealous and thought he knew what God wanted. What’s worse, he thought he could get away with it. People who kill always think they can get away with it.

We work so hard at it. We think we can get away with it. We go around killing the things we can’t control, only to discover we can’t control the things we’ve killed. The Easter earthquake tells us that truth can be a troublemaker; truth is what stirred up those people, and it stirs up people even now. If you want to cause an earthquake, start acting and living like everybody really does matter and every human being is a child of God.

Easter is an earthquake because it exposes our idolatries. Idolatry is still our biggest problem today. We not only worship the power of death but also the power of money. You can see it in the greed of those corporate executives who use “aggressive accounting” for personal gain. There is the idolatry of worshiping eternal youth, dogmatic certainty, and pursuing personal salvation so that you can feel deliciously superior when you are raptured and everyone else is “left behind.”

The Easter earthquake shakes up every part of our world. There is no tomb big enough, no rock large enough, and no guard diligent enough to keep the truth from moving on.

The Easter earthquake continues to shake up the world because whenever hate tries to overcome love, love cannot be kept in a tomb. When you kill it, it always comes back to life and is then even stronger. That’s because God is love, and when you mess with God, all your illusions of power are just that — illusions.

Sometimes when the Easter story is told, the emphasis is not on the power of love assuming a new and even more powerful form. Rather, the emphasis is on some legalistic transaction designed by God as a cosmic sacrifice for our sins, requiring the shedding of innocent blood as the price that must be paid to ransom all of creation. That understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection is too legalistic and deterministic for me. It does not have earthquake power.

In recent years, it's been popular to talk about a "shift of paradigms." As I understand this phrase, it means to have a new way of looking at the world brought on by decisive, formative events. Easter then becomes the ultimate paradigm shift because, in the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Jesus has given the world its most significant ideas of God. And once those ideas were turned loose, they could not be recalled like you might recall a defective automobile."

The further truth about the Easter earthquake is that once it happened, the aftershocks kept rumbling on long after the earthquake had subsided. Those aftershocks are still being felt today. Once you've heard and believed certain things or had a unique or life-changing experience, you cannot go back to where you used to be or to what you used to be. The problem with Jesus, which could not be solved by killing him, is that his disciples had heard and experienced too much.

Sometimes when you've been watching some courtroom scene on television or in a movie, you will see an attorney object to some statement or piece of evidence. The judge will honor the objection and ask that it be stricken from the record. But the jury has still heard it. Can they totally strike it from their memory? Can they "unhear" it? How can you really pretend you haven't heard or experienced something, especially if it's the truth?

The authorities who were dealing with Jesus tried to erase the blackboard and dismiss the class, assuming that without a teacher, all learning would stop and the truths that he taught would be forgotten.

In the same way that the Easter earthquake is a metaphor for an old way of seeing things breaking apart, the empty tomb is a metaphor to remind us that the followers of Jesus found they could not "un-hear" what they had heard, nor could they return to their former selves after having been brought into a new relationship with God because of their association with Jesus. They were convinced that the Spirit of God, which they had come to know in Jesus, was still among them, still teaching them, still encouraging them. And now, because of the Easter earthquake and the empty tomb, that Spirit was with them wherever they were. It was not limited to one place or to one person or group in one time period.

The world wants you to believe, "He's gone. Get over it. Return to your old ways." The Easter earthquake proclaims, "He's back. And now that Spirit is everywhere, available."

Unfortunately, there are some religious leaders even today who try to use this message to divide rather than unite the human family. There are those who seem to think that God's love isn't any fun unless you can find someone else to whom you can deny it. But the Easter earthquake proclaims that God's love is not a transaction. It is not a game of cosmic favoritism. It's a way of being in the world. It's a new way of seeing things.

We do not become "followers of the way" because we believe God is going to love us more than God loves non-Christians and will give us a ticket to eternity that God denies to others. We become "followers of the way" because we have fallen completely in love with the loving God that Jesus revealed.

We become "followers of the way" because we know that the Easter earthquake continues to break down walls that separate one human being from another so that one day we will be able to see everyone as created in God's image.

The world needs more Easter people. I hope you are one of them. Amen.