

Coming out

In working through Matthew's account of Jesus' last week in recent days, we have noted that Matthew seems keen on earthquakes. When he entered the city on what we call Palm Sunday we are told that the city was 'in turmoil' – literally shaken. To the core. Then on Good Friday we noticed that as Jesus breathed his last and died 'the earth shook' – an earthquake accompanied Jesus' death. Now, on Easter morning, as these two women both called Mary arrive at Jesus' tomb, we read that suddenly there was a great earthquake. And we have just read that extract from 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', where Aslan the lion comes back to life with a great cracking of the stone table on which Aslan had been slain

Somehow it seems that the very foundations of the universe have been shaken with this great spasm that springs Jesus from his grave, transporting him beyond its cold grasp. The earthquake strikes and suddenly Jesus is out, new wine bursting out of an old bottle. And then this angel appears and rolls away the stone and I have to say that I love this angel. He appears, face like lightning and clothes white as snow, fresh and glowing from the throne room of heaven, and he takes one look at the stone and heaves it away from the grave. But then, while everyone is shaking with fear and the guards are dropping down as though dead, he just sits down on the stone – perches on it, defiant and dismissive of all that it represents. I mean, how cool is that? He's pushed away this great stone, and like a removal man he now sits down and takes a breather – right on top of the stone. In my imagination I see him maybe pulling out a cigarette, striking a match on the stone and lighting up: after all he doesn't get to do that in the throne room of heaven. And as he blows the smoke through his nostrils, he says, 'Aw, don't be afraid – I know who you're looking for, but he's not here; he's been raised as he said he would be...' So casual, so matter of fact. And he concludes, 'This is my message for you...' In other words, that's me done. Sign here and I'm on to my next job.

So, return to that previous earthquake that rattled the city just as Jesus died. On Good Friday of this week, as we pondered Jesus crucifixion, we were thinking about that and the strange things that happened then. We read, 'Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook,

rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After Jesus' resurrection they came out of the tombs, and entered the Holy City and appeared to many.' Here it is not Jesus being sprung from his grave by the earthquake but the dead, the saints of old who come out and are seen wandering the streets after Jesus' resurrection, like sheep who have escaped from their pen. But it is not only the dead who are released by the earthquake. It is not only they who are coming out.

On Good Friday we were thinking of that great curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom as Jesus died. That was the curtain the hung in what was known as the holy of holies, the very centre of the temple where God was believed to dwell and that curtain kept God apart, out of reach, inaccessible in holiness. And one way of thinking of the tearing of that curtain is that somehow in Jesus' death that barrier was being torn down so that God becomes accessible to us and we can have friendship and fellowship with God. And certainly that is part of what was happening. But the other way of looking at it is to think not of us being let in to the presence of God but rather of God being let out, released. The curtain is torn and God's presence, confined and restricted in that narrow place floods out like water through a broken dam. Suddenly God is out, let loose in the world! And that is why the dead are seen partying in the streets and pubs of Jerusalem – the divine presence has burst out and is now swirling through the graves, giving life to the dead.

So, think of it: Jesus, coming out from that tomb on Easter morning, is prefigured by God coming out of that dark place in the temple and the dead coming out of their graves. And it is the phrase there 'coming out' that I want to focus on for I would suggest that it lies at the very heart of a resurrection faith, and it is a phrase that echoes and resounds through the history of God's people. Go back centuries to Egypt, and God's people the Israelites are groaning under Pharaoh's tyrannical rule, oppressed and crushed under the burden of slavery. And God's command to Pharaoh is to 'let my people go'. And here there is not an earthquake but it is plagues and calamities that shake Egypt to the core until finally the Israelites are released and they come out to freedom and new life. And a couple of weeks ago here in church we thought of a great dramatic moment in John's Gospel when Jesus stands before the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus who has died. On that occasion there was a kind of an earthquake too, though a rather different one. We are told that as he stood before the grave of his dear friend Jesus was 'deeply moved and troubled'.

Here it was not the earth that moved but Jesus in his spirit and his gut, shaken to his core as he was by a combination of grief and compassion and anger. Here was an internal earthquake of the heart that provoked that great cry, 'Lazarus, come out!' - and out stumbles Lazarus, and his grave clothes are unwound.

Are you beginning now to glimpse an image of resurrection? It's about being released from hidden, confined spaces. It's all about coming out. And we know of course the associations that are carried by that phrase 'coming out'. And I think we can learn something from how that phrase is used in the LGBT community to mean being released to be who you truly are. This is what 'coming out' means for us all. It means rolling away and sitting defiantly upon the stones that keep the truth of who we really are sealed up and hidden. Resurrection faith is the faith that releases us to be our true selves. It means coming out to our true identity.

This takes us to one more place. We have thought of things that are locked away and awaiting release - Israel in Egypt and Lazarus in his grave; and God, in that hidden place in the temple, and Jesus, deep in his tomb. Well, I want to take that thought in a rather different direction and close with one more thing, something beloved and precious, which is hidden away and waiting to come out and to be released. What is it? Well, it's you, and let me explain what I mean.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae this morning we come upon a beautiful phrase. Listen to it again: 'you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' Now, it would take a whole sermon to even begin to unpack that phrase, but what Paul is saying in a nutshell is that in each one of us there is a 'you', a self, that needs to die. In each one of us there is a 'you' which isn't really 'you' at all but which you have become. It's that distorted version of yourself that you are all too familiar with, the person that you wish you weren't and that you despair of in your better moments. And the good news is that Jesus has taken that impostor to the grave with him. And the good news is when he rose to new life he took a new 'you' with him. What he took is the person that God has created you to be and that Christ wants to release you to be. It's your true self that will one day be revealed in all its glory. And where is that new 'you'? Where is that true 'you' now? Well, it is hidden with Jesus in God. It's hidden away there in that holy place and it is waiting to come out. And as we are united to Jesus and as we live with him and

walk with him and follow him that new person is gradually released, taking shape and being formed. And so we are changed.

This is the Gospel! You died with Jesus and you rose with Jesus and your true self is now hidden with Jesus in God. Easter is a day to celebrate coming out! Hallelujah and amen!

O holy God, loving God,
We your people worship and praise you
For who can keep silent on this Easter morning.
God of earthquake and rolling rock,
God who shakes the foundations
and sets people free,
God who turns fear into joy
and mourning into dancing,

we praise you on this day of all days.

Today we celebrate a love that is stronger than death,
today we celebrate a life that bursts forth from the grave,
today we celebrate a joy that over-rides fear,
a hope that overcomes despair.

Today we celebrate Jesus –

Crucified and buried and risen from the grave.

O God we come with all our old lives and habits,
our old preoccupations and attitudes, our old sins,
and we would gladly leave them behind in the tomb.

We would gladly leave them there with a pile of grave clothes and step
out into new lives, as new people.

There is so much that we want shot of.

And so we pray to you, confessing our sins

And looking to you for newness.

Gracious God,

God of resurrection,

forgive what is past

and raise us by your Spirit to new life
in love and gratitude to you.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

