

Earthquakes, Lightning, and Tambourines
April 20, 2014, Easter Sunday
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Recently I heard of a woman, named Mary, who has a four-year old daughter. She shared her conversations with little Sarah as Easter approached in which she struggled to get through to the four-year old girl the true meaning of Easter. It went something like this:

"Mommy, will the Easter bunny bring me purple jelly beans?"

I am sure he will bring you jelly beans, Sarah. But, remember, Easter isn't about the bunny. It's about Jesus.

"But will they be purple?"

Yes, honey, I am sure there will be some purple ones in there. Honey, the important thing about Easter isn't the bunny. Easter is about how much Jesus loves you and me and the whole world.

"Mommy, HOW MANY purple jelly beans will the Easter Bunny bring me?"

Sarah, I think he will probably bring plenty of purple jellybeans. Do you know how much God loves you?

"Mommy..."

Yes, Sarah?

"Will he bring me tootsie rolls too?"

No one perseverates like a 4-year-old.

For Sarah, the most compelling part of Easter was purple jellybeans. For some of you, it may be the Easter hymns, accompanied by trumpet. For others, it is the beauty of the lilies. For others, it is a chance to gather around a dinner table with family. Really, there is nothing wrong with any of those things. All are wonderful; all have their place. But, of course, the theme that runs like a thread through the Easter story, according to the Gospel of Matthew, is not food or music. It's fear. It's seismic change. It's lightning-like illumination. It's a growing dawn of unexpected joy.

Of course there was fear. The two Marys had just witnessed an execution. The city was under martial law. There were soldiers posted at the tomb, next to the great stone. The women were heartbroken, grieving. As C.S. Lewis wrote in A Grief Observed, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." Only great love and courage brought those women back to that terrible place: the guarded, sealed tomb.

Matthew's Gospel is the only one that speaks about an earthquake. For Matthew, the cataclysmic change in the cosmos needed a corresponding natural expression. I am thinking that this earthquake did nothing to relieve the fear of the folks next to the tomb. The soldiers who had been posted to make sure that nothing suspicious happened to the body of the Criminal were knocked flat with terror. The women, those brave, sad Marys, kept on their feet, with their eyes open.

Eyes that were dazzled by a kind of lightning. Once again, this is Matthew's touch: an expression for the sudden bright illumination that was coming to the world. A messenger from God, stronger than any human, rolls back the sealed stone and sits on it, nonchalant in his dazzling white clothes. This messenger is aware of the shock the women feel and greets them, right off, the way

that angels often do: “Do not be afraid.” There is no need to grieve any more. The tomb is empty. And, there is work to do.

Earthquakes, lightning, and then, joy. The Marys hurry off, with fear and great joy, to follow the instructions, to find the disciples. How authentic this seems to me: the combination of fear and joy that comes with the world being turned upside down. But there is more. They meet their beloved teacher on the way. He has a new greeting. His first word is *chairete*, “**Rejoice!**” The risen Jesus has a message for his brothers (a loving name for the disciples who had deserted him a few days before): the brothers are to go back to Galilee. Jesus will be there before them and meet them. There is work for them to do as well.

The story of the resurrection does not sit easily with all of us. It is not just the problem of impossible miracles. Many of us look around and wonder how to celebrate new life. We look at the world through the lenses of Holy Saturday, and that time of uncertainty and waiting, the experience of fear and suspense, seems a more realistic picture of the human condition. Even the most devout Christians, when waking up on Easter Sunday, struggle with the reality of pain and death. We hear that Jesus’ resurrection changed everything, that the cosmos shuddered with new birth, but how has the world changed? It seems that resurrection does **not** do away with tragedy and injustice, but places them in a context of hope. Just as the prophet Jeremiah gave his suffering people words of hope and future blessing, a promise of tambourines and dancing, resurrection sends us into the future. We are not defined by the mistakes of the past, by the ways we have been wounded and wronged, because we follow one who rose above those limitations. We follow one who forgave his friends and enemies. We follow one who urges us to rejoice and launches us on our way.

The story of the resurrection allows us to believe in possibilities for the kinds of redemption and reconciliation that can happen on any day, not just on Easter. The story of the resurrection grabs our attention by shaking us up, flashing bright lights in our eyes and giving us a job to do. The story of resurrection does not have much to do with flowers, or candy or sunshine or feasting. It shows us the divine power to transform fearful and wounded people into messengers of joy and love.

Celebrating Easter is knowing that the crucifixions of our time are not the last word. Despair does give way to joy. Tombs do give way to open air; bondage does give way to freedom. We are freed from fear to live, to act in ways that will bring divine forgiveness, compassion and justice to all those still caught in shame, pain, and oppression. The two Marys celebrated Easter when they knew that God went ahead of them into Galilee and into the rest of the world. With them, we celebrate that God is not locked in the past, locked in ancient history when people believed in the supernatural. We celebrate that God is not locked in our personal past either – in our mistakes, in our lost idealism, in our lost loved ones, or our wasted opportunities. With the Marys, we find that God has gone ahead of us, into **our** future: the One who still forgives, still feeds the hungry, still loves with everlasting love, still cries out for peace and healing.

Of course, there will be both fear and great joy, struggling within the human heart. The Marys felt that way as they encountered Jesus, full of awe and celebration, and then, eager to see how and where and when the Risen One would meet them again with their brothers, their neighbors and strangers. We can share their eagerness: the anticipation that God will meet us when we advocate for peace and justice, when we feel gratitude for new life, when we heal and when we are generous.

When we celebrate resurrection today we have no need for either literal fundamentalism or enlightenment skepticism. We are talking about our common human lot: fear and joy, sorrow and hope. The sacred story that is the Gospel gives us the power and courage to live into and through these feelings. Our story tells us to visit the tomb, because we may find there a future for ourselves and for others. Our story tells us to listen to the messengers of hope, because they will give us a job to do. Our story teaches us to find our brothers and sisters, a beloved community that needs to hear about that trip Jesus has planned for us. When I celebrate resurrection, I believe that, against all odds, the two Marys followed God into the future and that they found there a way to obey Jesus' greeting: "Rejoice!"

Today, Easter Sunday, is the most solemn and joyful holy day of the Christian year. We sell ourselves short if we think in terms of small steps and small pleasures and small outcomes: it is like trading a seismic revelation for some purple jelly beans. We recognize today that not everyone is feeling happy or powerful. Many still believe that yesterday will always be better than tomorrow. Many hear news of war and violence, and question whether hope can bloom again. Today we stand with those two Marys, fearful and joyful, blinking at the light at the entrance of the tomb. Can we hear the Good News? Can we take the next step? Can we run into the future, tambourines in hand, to sing a song of peace, a song of healing, a song of heavenly joy? May it be so, for each of us. Amen.