

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 24, 2011  
Easter Sunday**

**THE GREAT EASTER EARTHQUAKE**

**Matthew 28:1-10**

With the possible exception of seismologists, I don't know of anyone who looks forward to an earthquake. An earthquake is not usually a happy event. When Julie Andrews sang to the von Trapp children about "a few of (her) favorite things" in *The Sound of Music*, she did not include earthquakes in her list. Earthquakes bring disruption to the normal flow of life. They usually result in devastation and destruction, loss of life and property, sometimes of staggering proportions.

We saw this in the powerful earthquake – 9.0 on the Richter scale – that shook Japan just six weeks ago (March 11, 2011), triggering giant tsunami waves which destroyed entire towns, resulted in thousands of deaths, and caused a nuclear crisis by damaging reactors at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. We saw it in the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, resulting in more than two hundred thousand deaths and leaving more than a million Haitians homeless in a country already ravaged by poverty. And who can forget the monster earthquake centered in the Indian Ocean off the coast of the island of Sumatra on December 26, 2004? It was the second strongest quake ever recorded by seismologists, an estimated 9.3 on the Richter scale. It produced a tsunami of epic proportions which brought massive devastation, death and destruction to twelve different Asian countries, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

Other famous earthquakes in history include:

- The Great Chilean Earthquake of 1960, measuring 9.5 on the Richter scale, the highest magnitude ever recorded by seismologists.
- The Great San Francisco Earthquake which took place on April 18, 1906, toppling buildings and resulting in fires that destroyed much of the city.
- The New Madrid, Missouri Earthquake of 1811, the most powerful earthquake ever to hit our nation's midsection. Located on the Mississippi River, the town of New Madrid was completely destroyed and later rebuilt more than a mile from its original location. Subsequent quakes on February 7, 1812 temporarily changed the contour of the river bed, actually causing portions of the Mississippi to flow backward for several hours.
- The Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, which destroyed more than two-thirds of the city and killed more than half the city's population.
- The 1556 Earthquake in the Shaanxi Province of central China. It is the single most devastating earthquake on record, accounting for the deaths of 830,000 people.

Suffice it to say that ordinarily an earthquake is not a harbinger of good things. But in the biblical record of the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, in the account of these

events in the Gospel of Matthew, we read of not one but two earthquakes which took place at pivotal moments in the history of salvation.

The first of these earthquakes occurred on Good Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion. In Matthew 27:51, we learn that at the moment Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that the barrier separating us from God has been removed, and that, through faith in Jesus and His sacrifice for us on the cross, we are now free to come into the presence of God with confidence, knowing that we are accepted and loved by our Father in heaven. At the same time, Matthew says, "the earth shook and the rocks split" (27:51). The death of Jesus was accompanied by an earthquake that opened many of the tombs near the place of His crucifixion. As James Boice pointed out, earthquakes themselves are not necessarily miraculous, but the timing of this one was, occurring at the precise moment Jesus died.

This earthquake was a prelude to the resurrection of many Old Testament saints who had trusted in God and looked forward in faith to the coming of the promised Messiah. "The tombs broke open," Matthew says in verse 52, "and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life." Later on, after the resurrection of Jesus, these resurrected saints left their tombs and went into the city, where they appeared to many people (27:53). We have to admit that we enter into the realm of holy mystery here. There are details and aspects of this that we don't know. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who mentions this earthquake and the resurrections that accompanied it. I think we can say at least this much: It was a sign of the cosmic significance of the death of Jesus, and a preview or foretaste of the resurrection that lies ahead for everyone who truly believes and trusts in Jesus. Including you and me.

Then, on Sunday morning, a second earthquake occurred. But, first, there is something more we need to say about the death of Jesus. The cross and the empty tomb are inextricably connected. The death of Jesus on Friday and His resurrection on Sunday cannot be separated from one another. The death of Jesus without the resurrection is just an inspiring, but terribly sad, story. And the resurrection, without the suffering and death of the Savior on the cross, is hollow. The One whose resurrection we celebrate and proclaim to the world today is the same One who bore our sins in His own body on the cross, the One who took upon Himself the punishment we deserve for our sins. He took our place.

On our family vacation to California last summer, we visited Muir Woods, named after John Muir, just a short drive across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. It is a beautiful place with its majestic redwoods. Muir was a famous explorer and naturalist who was the first head of the Sierra Club from its founding in 1892 to his death in 1914. He is known as "the father of our National Parks." In his book *Travels in Alaska*, Muir tells the story of two native tribes that embraced the message of the gospel when missionaries came to them in 1879. The Thlinkits, Muir wrote, were particularly quick to accept the doctrine of atonement, because it was something they practiced in their own way. They told Muir about a war some years earlier between their tribe and the Sitka tribe. After fighting all summer, sometimes out in the open, sometimes behind cover, it got to the point that none of the Thlinkit women dared to go out to the salmon streams or berry fields to get their winter stock of food. Finally, one

of their chiefs ventured into an open space between the fortified camps of the tribes, and asked to speak with the leader of the Sitkas.

When the Sitka chief appeared, the Thlinkit chief said to him: "My people are hungry. If this war goes on much longer, most of my people will die of hunger. We have fought long enough; let us make peace. You brave Sitka warriors go home, and we will go home, and we will all set out to dry salmon and berries before it is too late."

The Sitka chief replied: "You may well say 'let us stop fighting,' when you have had the best of it. You have killed ten more of my tribe than we have killed of yours. Give us ten of your men to balance our blood-account. Then, and not till then, we will make peace and go home."

"Very well," said the Thlinkit chief. "You know my rank. You know that I am worth ten common men and more. Take me, and make peace."

His offer was accepted. The chief of the Thlinkits stepped forward and was shot in the sight of the fighting bands. Peace was established, and everyone hurried back to their homes. This chief literally gave himself as a sacrifice for his people. He died, so that they might live. So, when missionaries told them the good news about Jesus and His atoning sacrifice for us, when they explained that all of humankind has turned away from God, that all of us have gone our own way instead of following God's way, that all of us have sinned against Him and deserve to die as a result, but then God's Son stepped forward and, like this tribal chief, offered Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice to take upon Himself the punishment we deserve, to die in our place in order to set us free from the power of sin and guilt, and to reconcile us to God through faith in the saving work of His Son, they believed. They said: "Yes, your words are good. The Son of God, the Chief of chiefs, the Maker of the whole world, must be worth more than all mankind put together. Therefore, when His blood was shed, the salvation of the world was made sure."

The message of the cross is that God loves sinners. The message of the cross is that God saves sinners. The message of the cross is that Jesus gave His life to make atonement for my sins, your sins, and the sins of everyone who turns to Him and trusts in Him for salvation. Have you taken that step of faith? Have you turned to Him in true humility and repentance for your sins? Have you opened your heart to Him in faith? Have you put your trust in Him alone to make atonement for your sins, to set your heart right with God, and to give you a place in His family? Have you done that? Will you? Today?

This Easter day can be your spiritual birthday. This resurrection day can be the birthday of your soul. This can be the defining moment in your life when you embrace the saving work of Jesus and His amazing love for you. Say yes to Him today. Say yes to Him right now.

Unless we understand our need to have Jesus take our place, unless we understand what Jesus did for us on the cross and trust in His saving work, the message of the resurrection will never be anything more than a nice sentiment that we acknowledge once a year on Easter. In reality, though, the resurrection of Jesus caused the earth to shake and quake.

This is the second earthquake Matthew mentions. After the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb (27:57-61), guards were posted at the tomb to prevent the followers of Jesus from engaging in some kind of trickery by stealing the body of Jesus.

When the women came to the tomb at dawn on Easter morning, they didn't know it was Easter morning. They didn't know it was resurrection day. They came to anoint the body of Jesus with spices, as an act of love. Like all of Jesus' disciples, they thought Jesus was still dead. Apparently they hadn't thought about how they would remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb. But then, as Matthew says in verse 2, "there was a violent earthquake." In *The Message*, it says: "Suddenly the earth rocked and reeled under their feet." If Carole King had been there, I think she might have said: "I feel the earth move under my feet."

They *did* feel it – both the women who were there, and the soldiers standing guard. Both the women and the guards saw the angel, too. They saw him roll the stone away from the entrance, and then sit down on it. It scared the guards to death (figuratively, not literally). It got them "all shook up," and then they froze up in fear. Both the women and the guards saw for themselves that the tomb was empty. They all saw that Jesus wasn't there. And it was obvious to them that the angel didn't remove the stone from the entrance in order to let Jesus out. No way! Jesus was already up and out. The stone was rolled away not for Jesus' benefit, but for theirs (and ours). The stone was rolled away to let the women, and the soldiers, and, a bit later, Peter and John see in and begin to come to terms with the realization that all of Jesus' talk about rising from the dead was really true. It had really happened, just as He said it would. Both the women and the guards heard the angel say that He had risen.

Of course, the soldiers and the women had different reactions to the news. The women, with a mixture of fear and joy, ran to tell the disciples (28:8), and on the way, they met Jesus Himself, fell at His feet and worshipped Him (28:9). Just as you and I ought always to do in our hearts, for He is still among us, through the Holy Spirit, ready to reveal Himself to us, waiting for us to recognize Him.

The soldiers, on the other hand, went off to tell the Jewish leaders what they had seen and heard. The Jewish leaders had wanted Jesus dead, and, once dead, they desperately wanted Him to stay dead. They didn't understand that death couldn't keep its hold on Him. They didn't understand that there was no tomb, or stone, or seal, or guard, or any army on earth that could stop Jesus from rising again. They had made the tomb as secure as they knew how (27:65-66), but their security measures proved to be no match for the power of God.

When the soldiers went back to the religious leaders and told them about the earthquake, and the angel, and the stone being rolled away, and the body of Jesus not there in the tomb, the religious leaders bought their silence. They paid the soldiers to lie – to spread a false story about the disciples of Jesus coming during the night and stealing the body while the guards were sleeping. They chose to cover up the truth, because, sadly, they couldn't stand the truth.

The truth is that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, the spotless Lamb of God, suffered and died on the cross to save sinners like us who cannot save ourselves. Though it cost Jesus His

life, this salvation is a gift of grace which comes free of charge to people who do not, will not, and cannot ever deserve it. I am one of these people. And so are you.

The truth is that Jesus suffered and died on the cross in our place, to make atonement for our sins. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. And on the third day – on the first day of the week, on the day we call Easter – He rose again from the dead. That is the truth. But it doesn't end there.

After attending an Easter service a few years ago, a woman went up to the pastor and asked: "So, what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?"

"Well, He ascended into heaven," the pastor said, "and He's still alive."

"I know He was resurrected," she said, "but He's alive?"

"Yes, He's alive."

"Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?"

For the next two weeks, this woman called everyone she knew and said: "Jesus is alive! Did you know He's alive?!"

Dear friends, did you know? Did you know that Jesus willingly went to the cross and there gave His life for you? Did you know that after He died, they took His body down from the cross, laid Him in a tomb, and put a seal across the stone covering the entrance to the tomb? Did you know that there was an earthquake on Easter morning, and an angel rolled away the stone to reveal that Jesus wasn't there? Did you know that Jesus rose again from the dead on the third day, just as He had said? And did you know that He is alive, never to die again? Did you know He is coming again to consummate all of history and the eternal purposes of God? Did you know?

Did you know that, just as He is now exalted in heaven, He desires to be exalted in you? In your life? Did you know that He wants to live His resurrection life in you? Did you know that He wants you to live your life in the grace and power He gives, for the glory of His name?

Did you know all these things?

A German theologian named Wolfhart Pannenberg has said that "the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event." (Isn't that a brilliant theological insight?) "And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

There was an earthquake at the tomb on Easter morning. It was part of God's plan to let us know that Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! May we never again live as though Jesus were

dead, but may our lives be revolutionized by the power of His resurrection life in us. May it change the way we live.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of our risen Savior. Amen.