

“All Out of the Ordinary”  
Matthew 28:1-10 and Colossians 3:1-4  
First Presbyterian Church  
Easter, April 16, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

What have we done to Easter? We have domesticated it. We have tamed it. We have reduced it to a nice little story.

Easter begins with an earthquake, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have gone to the tomb. There is a real, live earthquake. But all we immediately think of is *San Andreas*. You remember that movie, don't you? The Rock, Dwayne Johnson, plays a search and rescue helicopter pilot in California. The San Andreas fault gives way, he and his estranged wife together rescue their daughter.

It's not a great film. One critic wrote, “It's twice as dumb as it should be.”

We hear about the Easter earthquake, but we think only about some cheesy movie depiction. We have turned Easter into a story, just another story.

Easter begins with an angel, a real, live angel, descending from heaven and rolling back the stone. This is an honest-to-God angel. But all we immediately think of is the Easter stained glass window over in the sanctuary. All the stained glass windows have been restored; the colors are vibrant and beautiful. The angel sits at the empty tomb, surrounded by lilies and the crown of thorns Jesus had worn on the way to the cross. The angel's hand is outstretched. His wings are huge.

It's just an image. It reminds us of other Easter angel art, from Fra Angelico to He Qi. No matter the style, we think of it as art, found on a stained-glass window or hanging in a museum. We think about that, not the touch of the holy or the voice of the sacred or a breathtaking surprise. We have turned Easter into a nice, little story.

Easter is so much more.

Easter is the power of life. Like a real earthquake or an electric charge, the message of the angel is decisive and shocking. “Jesus, who was crucified, Is. Not. Here. He has been raised from the dead.”

But pastor, how can we believe in resurrection life in this world of death and distress? What about the gas attack in Syria that killed families and children, the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing their homes, the tensions escalating around North Korea's nuclear program? What about the California husband who came to his wife's classroom to kill her – and also killed an eight-year-old boy?

Beyond all this are our own personal stories, all our burdens of death and distress. For me, a friend with stage four pancreatic cancer, now spread to his liver. And the wife and young children of my dear friend, Scott, making their way forward after losing their 37-year-old husband and father to cancer.

It is enough to make us scream. It is enough to make us cry. It is enough to make us wonder if we should turn away from the story of an empty tomb. It is enough.

If we are not careful, we will reduce Easter until it is neat and tidy, a simple, carefully wrapped package. We give up on hope and trust because it seems too much to believe. Death seems to have the last word.

You and I must say no to these temptations. We must be straight about our brokenness, our pettiness, our meanness and our anger. We must find the courage to open our hearts anew to God's radical love.

We who follow Christ have been raised with Christ. So we set our minds and hearts on heavenly things – giving and forgiving, healing and being healed.

Roberta Bondi taught at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. She says this, "Living in the power of the resurrection means refusing to accept that the broken will ultimately remain broken." God's desire to heal will win out. God's desire to heal will save the day. God's desire to heal will transform us and our attitudes and actions.

For us before resurrection is big, it is small. It is a growing thing. Before resurrection blossoms, it begins tiny. It grows in the cracks of our brokenness. Resurrection grows. We must trust resurrection with each step of faith.

You and I cannot be embraced by Easter as long as it is only a reminder of a movie or an artistic image or even a story from the pages of a book. Easter becomes Easter only when it claims our lives, when it grabs us and shakes us.

This morning I want to share with you the dirty little secret of being a Presbyterian pastor.

Last week, I was about to begin writing the Easter sermon when a longtime church member reached out to me. They said, "Most Easter sermons deal with universal truths. Please make the resurrection as personal as possible. What does it mean to me, where I am, at this time, in my life?"

Let me tell you about this person, this church member. I watch this person hope, in a world that walks all over hope. I watch this person persist, in a world that gives up on each other at the drop of a hat. I watch this person give and receive forgiveness, in a world that doesn't do much of that. I watch this person serve with an open heart, when everybody out there is asking, "What's in it for me?"

That is the dirty secret of life as your pastor: I receive more than I give. I have watched you be exemplars of love, even after the death of a child. I have seen you trust your lives to redemption and hope, even after a wrenching divorce. I have watched you give from the heart, even when your 401k or brokerage account was small or nonexistent. I have seen you laugh and lead and dance in faith, even when you may have wondered if anyone would follow.

That is exactly what Colossians is pointing to: "Set your minds on the things that are above."

Hope. Persistence. Forgiveness. Service.

Love. Redemption. Generosity. Leadership. Faith.

I watch you come to worship, week after week and Easter after Easter, because you know this life, you embrace this life, this mindset that requires practice and more practice. Anne Lamott, the great

American writer, said it rightly a few days ago in Kansas City. “I go to church,” she said, “because it is my medicine, my chemo for my soul sickness. . . I get everything I need there.”

For me this Easter, this biggest gift is also the strangest. It’s right there in Colossians, “Set your minds on the things that are above, on compassion and kindness and humility and patience . . . for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

I had to sit with that one for a long time. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. Eugene Peterson puts it this way. “Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your *real* life – even though invisible to spectators – is with Christ in God. *He* is your real life.”

Far too often, I’m afraid, you and I do not live that way. What seems most important is all the stuff we see, the headlines, the achievements, the neon. Did you make an A on that last spelling test? Or dean’s list this semester at college? What about that promotion? Or that new job with so much more authority – and money?

It gets more than a little gross, but that’s the way the world works, we think. Do we have a trophy wife or a trophy husband? Or a trophy car? Are our kids the best and the brightest? Do we have enough? Is there enough to be satisfied? Is there ever enough?

In our brokenness, I’m afraid we all know the answer to that.

When our wants and whims and jealousy and lusts are big and bold, Easter is only a story, a fairy tale, a media package.

But if we stop and think and pray, if we find the strength to come face-to-face with the parts of us broken and petty and mean and ugly, we discover life – real life – hidden in places we often miss.

It is hidden in hope. It is hidden in persistence. It is hidden in forgiveness and servanthood.

It is hidden in redemption. It is hidden in generosity. It is hidden in faith.

It is hidden in love.

That’s where we find Easter.

Omid Safi is a professor at Duke University. He writes about the beauty that emerges from cracked spaces, from cracked and broken hearts. He points to the Japanese art form of kintsugi. In kintsugi, cups and chalices and mugs and dishes that are cracked are repaired. There is no attempt to hide the crack. Instead a beautiful new thread of gold or silver lacquer is placed there. We find beauty, he writes, in the broken things.

This Holy Week, my friend Lara, young widow of my dear friend Scott, has travelled to be with family. She shared this reflection. “[Two days ago] was Maundy Thursday. It’s the day of the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted communion and washed the feet of his disciples. It’s been a favorite of mine for years.

“This year I both longed for and dreaded Maundy Thursday. It’s hard to explain the mix of emotions. Communion means something different when the desire to be united with those in heaven pulls at

your heart. In communion, we on earth are united with those who get to enjoy the banquet in the presence of God. I pictured [all this] as I shared communion in my brother's church. It breaks my heart and somehow mends it all at once."

Easter is the power of life, a life that comes through brokenness and death. We find Easter and its power when we discover that we have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God.

It is hidden in hope. It is hidden in tears and laughter. It is hidden in faith.

It is hidden in love.

Christ is risen!