

Matthew 28:1-10
Colossians 3:1-4

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

Forty-nine years ago this month, an earth-shattering event took place in Martinsville. In fact, on March 2, 1959, the earth quaked right here at First Presbyterian Church! As many of you know, that was the day the thirty-eight-hundred-pound steeple was supposed to be placed atop the new church. This was a big event for the community; after all, its not every day you get to see a steeple raised high in the air by a crane operator and lifted in place on top of the church. Jim Stegall, the author of our churchs history book Grace Upon Grace, reports that many people were on hand: church members, city dignitaries, news reporters from the Martinsville Bulletin and the Roanoke Times, neighbors, and children and teachers from Patrick Henry School across the street.

Finally, the cranes engine roared, the slack in the cranes cable tightened, and the long steeple lifted off of the ground. The base of the steeple began to turn in a slow, circular motion. The steeple began to turn faster and faster, and then it began to swing crazily out of control with the aluminum cross slamming into nearby treetops. Then, the steeple crashed to the ground, and the cross smashed through the glass windshield of the cranes cab. Thankfully, no one was injured. (Pp. 147-150)

I have heard that same story recounted dozens of times by eyewitnesses, a number of whom are here today. That earth-shaking event had a tremendous impact on the lives of many people that day. Forty-nine years later, people still talk about the day our churchs steeple fell!

With that occurrence in mind, just imagine how much more powerful the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was and is today. People are still talking not only about his death on the cross to be sure but also his resurrection from the dead - some two-thousand-years later! Jesus not only fell to deaths power and was placed in a tomb, he was also raised up three days later by the mighty power of God. Our focus is not on an empty tomb but the living Lord, who has conquered both sin and death and made good his promise to give us new, abundant, and eternal life.

As always we start with and are informed by scripture for the Word of God nourishes faith. In his gospel, Matthew recorded something that his colleagues (Mark, Luke, and John) knew nothing about, or, if they did, they chose to ignore. Matthew wrote about two earthquakes that occurred in relation to Jesus. The first one took place when Jesus cried with a loud voice from the cross and breathed his last. At that very moment, the temple curtain was torn in two, the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The second seismic activity occurred when Jesus arose triumphantly from the grave.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came back to Jesus tomb as soon as was possible, allowing for the Jewish Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. They waited until dawn of the next day (Sunday), and then they went to see the tomb. By the way, these two women had also been present at the foot of Jesus cross and had watched as Joseph of Arimathea sealed Jesus tomb by rolling a great stone across the opening. Suddenly, Matthew informs us, there was a great earthquake. An angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone and then sat on it. For fear of the angel, the soldiers shook and became like dead men. The two women, on the other hand, were told by the angel, Do not be afraid; I know that

you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.

Let me pause and share some insights about Matthews account up to this point. First, the two earthquakes at both Jesus crucifixion and his resurrection signify the shaking of our known world by a great, cataclysmic act of God. God was in control of the situation and God wanted to get peoples attention. Something earth-shaking and earth-shaping was going on, so pay attention!

And notice Matthews use of irony: the hardened Roman soldiers on guard duty were quaking in their sandals; and, they stood like dead men while the dead man they were supposedly guarding was no longer dead for Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Here is the power of God unleashed! The worldly powers then and now are no match for Gods mighty acts, especially when God flexed the divine muscle and raised Jesus from the dead. Remember: with God, all things are possible!

Then, did you hear the angel tell the two Marys that Jesus is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Three times earlier, Jesus had told the twelve disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo suffering, and be killed. However, each time Jesus uttered that prediction, he also went on to say, and on the third day be raised. In other words, as he said signifies that Jesus kept his word to the disciples. Jesus said he would be raised by God, and he was. Therefore, the two Marys and all of his disciples down through the centuries can trust Jesus at his word not because its a gentlemans word of honor but because it is the very Word of God!

The angel sent both Marys on their way to go quickly and tell the disciples what had taken place. They believed and so they acted on faith. We can understand and appreciate that they went forward from that disturbed place with a strange mixture of fear and joy after all, this was certainly outside the norm of daily existence and experience. Note what took place next. They didnt encounter Jesus; rather, Jesus met them. He sought them out and found them! Both Marys, in turn, ran to their risen Lord, hugged his pierced feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus echoed the angels words Do not be afraid. Jesus also told them to Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me. This is the only place in Matthews gospel where Jesus referred to his disciples as my brothers. This term of endearment gave assurance that Jesus forgave the ten who forsook him and the one who denied him. Whats most important is Jesus promise: they will see me. Remember as he said Jesus had kept his Word earlier and he would do so again and again and again!

Matthews story is one of four accounts about the first Easter morning when the earth shook, the tomb was burst open, and Jesus was raised from the dead. How it happened exactly remains a mystery two-thousand-years later. We cant explain the resurrection; we can only experience the resurrection. By the grace of God, our eyes have been opened to see and embrace the gospel truth of the risen Christ.

However, if we only believe this earth-shattering, good news of the gospel but do not allow it to shake us to the very core of our being so that old attitudes give way to new life in Christ, then, the full power of the resurrection still needs to get hold of us! I think thats what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote the Christians at Colossae and told them to Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, and not on the earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Jesus resurrection is meant to raise us up as well.

When our focus is on the risen Lord, and the power of the resurrection is at work in our lives, then life will be changed now and forever. As the angel and Jesus

said to both Marys, we too do not need to be afraid, especially of death for Christ has conquered death. Because he lives, we too shall live. Christ has made and Christ will keep that promise. We can come alive because death has lost its control and claim upon our future. We do not live in fear of death; and, we must not say, When I die, I hope that Ive been good enough to go to heaven. First of all, you and I will never be that good; if heaven were gained by our own efforts, we would all fall short of our goal. However, by the grace of God, we are assured of an eternal future in Gods heavenly kingdom. The holy power that raised Christ from the dead will do the same for us! Let us claim the power of the resurrection and live in confident and hopeful trust.

Fr. Henri Nouwen, before he died and was raised up into the Church Triumphant, said that every time he traveled anywhere in the world and landed at some strange airport, he had a fantasy that someone would be there who would say, Hey, Henri! Welcome! It would be someone who knew him and would welcome him with a smile. Each time he waited for the voice, and each time he was disappointed. But then he said to himself, Its all right. When I get home, my friends or family will be there. Nevertheless, the fantasy persisted. Every time he landed at a new airport he waited for the Hey, Henri! Over here! How are you? Glad to see you. But each time he was disappointed until he remembered that when he arrived back home, his friends and his family would be there to welcome him. Then he said that heaven will be like that. God will be there, and all his friends and family who have died. And when they see him, they will say, Hey, Henri! Glad to see you! How was it? Lets see your slides. (Maxie Dunnam, This is Christianity, p. 131) On September 21, 1996, Henri Nouwen died and was resurrected; and the God, who is faithful to the divine promise of eternal life, fulfilled Henris fantasy. At the same time, we need to understand that the power of the resurrection isnt reserved solely for heaven. Eternal life begins within this earthly realm. We are missing out if we seek the things that are above where Christ is but do not apply our faith and live the resurrected lifestyle right here and now. Because Christ was raised from the dead, by that same holy power, we can come fully alive, and not simply exist!

Heres the good news of the Gospel believe it, share it, and live it! On that first Easter, God made a way when there was no way. Gods light dispelled the darkness, and Gods powerful love defeated the power of death. There is no stone that is too big for God to roll away. And, if God can roll stones from graves, open tombs, and bring back the dead, then anything is possible. The Lord our God is still in the business of opening tombs and bringing people to life.

Educator Jeffery Holland tells about a pre-school teacher, who was facing burnout. She was a committed teacher whose heart particularly went out to the disadvantaged child. She had begun to despair over some of the children who seemed so lost, so limited. Then her mother died. She took a week off from her teaching duties to attend her mothers funeral. Her frustrations at the pre-school seemed like an even heavier burden in her life. Her first day back, she went through the paces like the competent professional she was. She smiled at the right times and hid her raw feelings.

But then it happened. She discovered Rachel picking the last chrysanthemum from the pot in the hall. Rachel, by the way, was the most distant, most disruptive child in the class. In a stern, trembling voice the teacher demanded, Rachel, what are you doing? Rachel held out in her little hand the flowers she had already picked. Mrs. Terrell, she said, "You used to be like a mother. Would these flowers help you to be like a mother again? I know you are sad. Wouldnt you like some flowers? The teacher responded, Rachel, what is a mother like?

Rachel said, A mother likes being with children. But Rachel, said Mrs. Terrell, I like being with children. Ive just well, Ive been well, Rachel, my mother passed away, and Rachel meekly interrupted, You mean she died? Yes, Rachel, said her teacher sadly, She died. Rachel looked up at her teacher and asked, Did she live until she died? Mrs. Terrell thought, what kind of question is that? Well, honey, of course, she said, All people live until they die; they Rachel interrupted her again. Oh, no they dont, Mrs. Terrell. Some people seem to die while they are still walking around. They stop being what they used to be. Mrs. Terrell, dont die just because your mother did. Be alive while you are alive. (Vital Speeches) Out of the mouths of babes. How do we witness to the world that Christ is alive? We do it by being alive ourselves! Let us claim the gospel truth for ourselves, and let us plug into the power of the resurrection so that the risen Lord can make a vast difference in our lives both in the here and now and in the hereafter. Christ is alive! By the grace and power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, let us be alive while we are alive; and then, when we die, let us come fully alive in the heavenly kingdom. May the power of Jesus resurrection get hold of us, shake us to the core, wake us up, and help us to live and love as God intends for us - now and for ever - to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen and Amen!

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