

What Easter Might Mean
Matthew 28:1-8

A Sunday School teacher asked her class to write one sentence each on "What Easter Means to Me." One pupil, visions of boiled Easter eggs looming large wrote: "Egg salad sandwiches for the next two weeks!"

And maybe to some folks it means even less. Since at least the Middle Ages, priests and pastors and preachers have been perplexed: the church is crowded on Easter, yet echoes with comparative emptiness the week after. As if the promise and the power of Easter rises with the dawn but like a seed planted in shallow soil withers and dies by the time the sun has set on the Resurrection Day. At least the egg salad sandwiches last a couple of weeks.

But I believe Easter means more than egg salad and I believe it lasts more than a couple of weeks. Easter, in fact, is the truth through which we forever more view life and even death.

It's no accident that as Matthew tells it, Easter begins with a bang. An earthquake, an earthquake that shatters all our preconceptions, all that we have believed before about power and truth and life.

As we center our lives on the power and promise captured in the Resurrection, then Easter might mean this: that God reaches in, overcomes, brings life from death, hope from despair, new

futures out of desolate pasts.

To be sure, this truth leads us to believe in eternal life. Absolutely. And we rightly savor and hold tight to the promise of eternity. But did you notice that on this first Easter our eternal life isn't mentioned so very much? The power and promise is more than eternal life: at Easter we know that Jesus is alive in our world. The power of Easter isn't something that must await our death. It is here and within us and among us now.

Let's look again at Matthew's description of this first Easter. We notice right away frightened guards and frightened women, powerful earthquake and empty tomb. So, Easter might mean this: God is a God of awesome power and strength. Easter means God is stronger than death. We can put it this way: Easter is God's act of restoring to life that power of love which the world would kill. It marks the defeat of the spiritual agents of darkness that seek to stifle and deny the healing and hope that Jesus brought into the world.

The guards are frightened because they are agents of the old world order, in which Caesar is king and hope and promise have no spiritual reality, but rather reality defined only by the cold calculations of a grasping humanity: wealth and position and allegiance to the emperor. Right they are to be afraid because if Jesus is alive, then everything their world is built on has been shaken to its very foundation, not by the earthquake, but by the resurrection.

And the women... they fear as well. They are uncertain and unsettled, to say the least.

Frightened, to say it more accurately. They figure out that Jesus is alive, just as he said he would be, but what does that mean for them? This early on Easter, they cannot know.

Then the angel reassures them, and in their words, the meaning of Easter becomes more clear: *"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'*

Now Easter means something more: The Risen Lord will go with us to Galilee. Galilee. That's our everyday life. Galilee is where we live, where we work, where we go to school. Galilee is our ordinary life after the breathtaking wonder of Easter is behind us. And the good news is: the Risen Lord will meet us there.

Jesus comes to us in Galilee, with the promise of something new, something better.

And then, this wonderful phrase from our Scripture: with joy and fear they hurry away from the tomb. Easter invites us to leave the tomb behind, that place of death and despair and defeat. Easter invites us to dare to believe in the goodness and blessedness of this journey we are on. Joy... but also fear.

So we hurry with joy, because Jesus is alive... yet also with fear, because we know this much: life

is different if Jesus is alive, and his spirit might lead us to places and attitudes and ministries which take us out of our comfort zone. As the women hurry from the tomb they know they are a part of this Jesus work and this Jesus hope, but they're not sure exactly how it will all work out. And neither do we, actually. The future is filled with promise, but also mystery, isn't it?

So what does Easter mean to you? How will the Living Lord shape, transform, shake up the life you are living?

Easter might mean this: if Jesus is alive, then Jesus' way of living is vindicated. Jesus died for the proposition that the Godly life is a life lived in obedience to God's purposes, which Jesus defined as loving neighbor as ourselves and loving even our enemies. Jesus' way is the way of doing to others as we would have them do unto us. Jesus' way is that the peacemakers are blessed and that the least of these, the hungry, the imprisoned, the impoverished, are objects not of Jesus' scorn, but of his special watchcare and love.

Jesus' way is to come back and forgive the very disciples who either denied him or ran away from him or at the very least slept while he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. And at Easter his way is vindicated, and at Easter his people, you and I, bring this ministry to life again and again to our world.

What does Easter mean to you? It begins with fear, as with trembling we are confronted with the awesome power God claims over our lives. It begins with fear and trembling as we know Jesus

is alive and sends us on a new journey.

And then Easter might mean this: it might mean joy.

The women hurry away from the tomb, because something about Easter impels us to hurry away from the place of death and destruction and despair. And, as they hurry away, the meaning of Easter is crystalized once more. For what happens next?

Suddenly. Suddenly. Suddenly. Jesus himself greets them. With one word: Rejoice.

Rejoice. Is this a first report from the world of death? Jesus has died and found that God has control even in death, Jesus has died and found that there is indeed life even after death, and so Rejoice.

Or maybe it is this: Rejoice, because Jesus is alive, and is present again on our journey as we hurry along. Jesus rises from death to life, not to leave us behind, not to wait for us, but to come to us. And in the midst of it all, to break through into our journey with the promise of hope.

What does Easter mean to you? At my best, Easter shapes the very way I look at the world, the very way I live. I'm far too old to believe that God will magically make everything all right. I've lived too long and seen too much. Loved ones who die, loved one who go through horrific illness without the benefit of a miracle magically making it all better.

But I also know this: beyond the darkness, in Resurrection is always the promise of light and blessedness encountering us on our journey, until our journey is fulfilled in eternity. The Resurrection is a reality that does not leave our life unaffected. It is the foundation of hope, of creativity, of love, of our concern for all and for everything, and of our joy in Christ, which cannot be taken from us.

Bishop Michael Ingham of the Anglican Church of Canada put it this way: *It's important to understand that God was not behind the crucifixion.* Now this might seem a controversial statement, but there's truth in it. My perspective is not that God demanded Jesus' death, but rather Jesus' obedience to truth, his mission, no matter what. And Jesus' obedience led him to stand firm against evil, even when evil arrested him, mocked him, scourged him, crucified him. Back to the quote: *It's important to understand that God was not behind the crucifixion. God was in the Resurrection. God is not a crucifying God, not a God of cruelty and domination. God is an Easter God, a God of new life who brings about miracles of transformation even in the bleakest of circumstances.*

This means we cannot say that human pain and suffering are brought about by God. It means rather that God has the power to transform human suffering and to bring forth from it something miraculous, something new and beautiful that defies all rational explanation.

So then, Easter means the God of power and promise, the God who raises Jesus from the dead, the God who calls us to invite the Risen Lord to travel with us, is faithful and life giving in the midst of all circumstance.

So , what might Easter mean to you? Easter, which shook the very earth to its core with earthquake. Easter, which frightened the guards with a new truth that power belongs to God and that power is bound up in Jesus Risen from the Dead. Easter, which begins in darkness and death and fear and is fulfilled in a new word from the Risen Lord: Rejoice.

Easter might mean at least this: no matter what, Christ is risen from the dead to break through every wall, of sorrow and sin and handicap and death and destruction and failure and frailty, to invite us to rise again, stand again, live again.