

Hy 31:1,2

Ps 60:1,2

Ps 18:2,3

Ps 46:1

Hy 73:1,2

Matthew 28:1-8

Isaiah 13:1-13

Hebrews 12:18-29

Matthew 28:5a: "But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid.'"

Yarrow, April 24, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

"Do not be afraid," said the angel to the women on that morning long ago. Really, congregation, how *impossible* was that instruction from the angel!

At the crack of dawn "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" were already threading their way out of the city of Jerusalem, through the garden where the tomb of their Master was. All was quiet, with nothing but the earliest birds astir in the garden around them. Suddenly the peace of the morning was broken with the tremors of a great earthquake! I do not know what it measured on the Richter scale, but the Holy Spirit tells us it was 'great'. Whether the two women saw the angel come down from heaven, whether they saw him roll back the stone, whether they saw the soldiers fall to the ground as dead men, is not told to us. But this we know: in the midst of that great earthquake the words of the angel are a mockery. Be not afraid when the earth rolls and rocks under your feet?! Be calm as a cucumber when rocks roll from hills around you, when the ground heaves and cracks beneath you?! "Be not afraid," said the angel to the two women. Really, congregation, tell *that* to persons who have seen their houses crumble around them!

But these angels spoke from God. And no instruction from God is ever impossible. These two sisters in the Lord could indeed be without fear, even while the earth quaked on. Why? Because the Christ had risen from the dead! And that resurrection in turn meant that these two weak children of God could stand in the judgment, would not be condemned in the court of God.

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MEANS THAT THERE IS NO NEED TO FEAR AN EARTHQUAKE.

1. The meaning of the earthquake in the Old Testament.
2. The word of the angel on Easter morning.
3. The instruction for the saints in the New Testament.

1. The meaning of the earthquake in the Old Testament

Earthquakes happen. That's particularly true of selective parts of the world, parts located on or near what is called a fault line.

Jerusalem, seismologists tell us, is located rather close to a fault line. Indeed, we're told that the Jordan River valley is a rift resulting from earthquake activity. So, an earthquake in the area of Jerusalem need not at all be a surprising occurrence. And—the scientists carry on—the earthquake of Easter morning was not necessarily extraordinary either. Slippage between tectonic plates due to build up of pressure....

That, brothers and sisters, is a natural, a scientific way of looking at things. And that's fine. But Scripture teaches that it's not the full picture. Behind what scientists can figure out is the hand of sovereign God, and this God caused this earthquake of Easter morning to happen for His own good reasons. To understand the reason, we need to investigate the role God has given

to earthquakes in the Bible.

Earthquakes are mentioned more often on the pages of holy Writ. Possibly the best known occurrence of an earthquake in the Old Testament is the time when God came down to His people on Mt Sinai. We read the following in Exodus 19: "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.... And Mt Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" (vss 16ff). This earthquake appeared in the context of God coming to earth, of God coming to His people. That people is sinful, while the God who approaches is holy. The meeting of God with His people, then, bodes ill for the people; God's coming must mean judgment. For that very reason the Lord told Moses to keep the people back from the mountain; should they get too close God would consume them. There you have the message of the earthquake; an earthquake implies *judgment*.

It's this theme of judgment that recurs in Scripture when the earthquake is mentioned. The prophet Isaiah is moved by God to speak of God's judgment over Babylon. The day of God's judgment is announced in terms of creation being moved, being knocked out of its normal pattern. Isaiah mentions that God Almighty will stop the stars from giving their light, will make the sun dark at its rising, will turn the moon off (13:10). More, God "will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of His fierce anger" (vs 13). Jeremiah speaks in similar terms: "At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation" (10:10). So when the prophet Nahum must tell Israel about the judgment of God upon the oppressive Assyrians, the prophet says this: "The mountains quake before Him, the hills melt.... Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the heat of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken asunder by Him" (1:5f).

But it's not only God's judgment against heathen nations that is expressed in the earthquakes. The prophets of old spoke also of God's judgment coming upon His own people Israel, spoke of that judgment coming accompanied by earthquakes. Listen to Amos (8:7f): "The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: 'Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and every one mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?'"

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary knew the Old Testament Scriptures. Earthquakes? Those, they knew from God's revelation, were not spasms resulting from struggles between feuding deities. Nor were they simply natural occurrences devoid of divine significance. The revelation of the God of Israel was clear on it; earthquakes came from His hand. And that revelation was so clear too as to *why* God sent earthquakes; they were part of, yes, they foretold His judgment upon a people sold to sin. Earthquakes: they spelled out God's judgment, judgment for the nations far away, judgment even for His own covenant people! Such was the teaching of the Old Testament.

In the quiet of the early dawn they made their way from Jerusalem through the garden to the grave. Earthquake!! Judgment!! Here comes God in His judgment, and who can stand before His indignation?? "Wail, for the day of the Lord is here, destruction from the Almighty comes! All hands are feeble, every man's heart melts, they are dismayed. Pangs and agony seizes them; they are in anguish like a woman in travail. They look aghast at one another; their faces are aflame" (cf Is 13:6ff). Earthquake: *divine Judgment!* No wonder the women are afraid!

2. *The word of the angel on Easter morning.*

But listen: a voice pierces through their cries of anguish. One voice in the midst of the panic: “do not you be afraid.” The voice was of the angel, one of those “ministering spirits sent forth by God to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation” (Heb 1:14). He spoke the words his Sender told him to say to these two women: “do not be afraid.” Straightaway he mentioned too why the women should not be afraid even while the rocks continued to roll from the hills; said the angel: “I know you seek the Jesus who was crucified. He’s not here, for He has risen. Look, this is where He lay.”

There, brothers and sisters, is the reason why the two women should not be afraid. *Jesus has arisen, is dead no more.*

What the resurrection of Jesus has to do with the earthquake, with the way the two Mary’s respond to the earthquake? It’s all in why Jesus died. On the Friday previous to this Easter Sunday, this same Jesus had died, been buried. Yet His death had not been like the deaths of the thousands before Him. First He had endured the hellish agony of His Father’s rejection, had experienced all the hatred of hell unleashed against Him, had felt the disdain of the kinsfolk who nailed Him to the cursed cross. While He hung there on the cross, His God had come in judgment, found Him guilty of sin, condemned Him, and therefore turned His face away from the Son – the sky was darkened though it was high noon. Why the rejection from God?? It was because the sins of mankind were piled onto Jesus Christ. He was made sin, and so the terrible judgment of God which sinners deserve has been loaded onto Him. And there, brothers and sisters, is also the cause of His death: *He died that He might pay for sin.* He gave up His life on Calvary three days earlier so that there might be forgiveness of sins for all those chosen to life.

But if He died to pay for sins, there is no longer any condemnation from God for those for whom He died! (Romans 8:1a). If He died to pay for sins, His God in heaven no longer has a case against those sons of man who belong to Christ. *Their sins are gone.*

Now there is this earthquake. For the guards protecting the grave, that earthquake was terrible; here came God in judgment. Horror of horrors; the guards trembled and –we read– “became like dead men.” God in judgment! And who can stand before His indignation??

But the women receive a different word. “Do not you be afraid.” Why not? Christ has risen, and His resurrection means that *His payment for sin has been accepted by God in heaven!* “He has risen,” and that is the proof that Yes, God was satisfied with His sacrifice. His holy anger has been stilled. His wrath against the sins of His people is no more. Here is precisely what the apostle Paul could write in his letters so many years later: “If Christ has not been raised, ...you are still in your sins.... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead” (I Cor 15:17,20). And again: Jesus “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

“Do not you be afraid.” Given what the Old Testament had said about earthquakes, the women should have been most terrified indeed when the ground began to roll under their feet. But since the time of God’s Old Testament revelation has there been progress in the history of salvation! The Messiah has died, has atoned for sin. Just how successful He was in accomplishing that redemption is pointed up in the words of this messenger from God; the women need not be afraid anymore. The Jesus who died is now alive, proof that the Father was satisfied with His sacrifice. *So there remains no sin on the account of these women;* they may confidently appear in the presence of God, yea, may feel comfortable even when God comes in judgment. Their sins are gone, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is their guarantee. *“Do not you be afraid.”*

This gospel as embodied in the words of the angel to these two women was understood by the church in the months and years ahead. The day came when the priests and the Sadducees arrested Peter and John because of their preaching, and after a trial laid upon them a command

to be silent; they should preach no more in the name of this Jesus of Nazareth. Together with the rest of the believers, the two released preachers prayed, besought the Lord for increased boldness to preach the gospel of life. Then we read this (Acts 4:31): “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken.”

But that trembling of the earth did not perturb these disciples, did not fill them with fear. They had learned from the experience of the two Mary’s on Easter Sunday that God’s people had nothing to fear when God came. For their sins were gone. And how correct these disciples were in not fearing is demonstrated by the fact that God came in fuller measure to live with them; the text tells us further that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.”

And there were those two missionaries, Paul and Silas, locked in the depths of that dungeon in Philippi (Acts 16:25ff). Because of that earthquake at midnight the doors of the prison sprung open –and surely that meant that the walls and ceilings were well and truly shaken too– and yet there is no record of fear on the part of the two missionaries. Judgment implied in the earthquake? Not anymore, not for Paul and Silas! For Jesus Christ had triumphed on Calvary, had arisen from the dead.

3. The Instruction for the saints of the New Testament.

So what now of us, brothers and sisters? We do not feel earthquakes often in this part of our God’s creation. But ought we to fear them?

I want to ask the question differently. What is your relation with God now? Can you stand before His judgment seat? The Christ died on account of our sins, arose as lasting evidence of the Father’s acceptance of His sacrifice. Can *you* now stand in His judgment?

We read together a portion from Hebrews 12. The reference there was to Mt Sinai, to the terrifying horror implicit in the fact that holy God wished to approach His sinful children; that mountain quaked. “So terrifying was the sight,” we read in Heb 12, “that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear’” (vs 21).

The New Testament saints, on the other hand, have come “to Mt Zion and to the city of the living God.” The reference is to the fact that the New Testament saints have in essence entered the Promised Land. Yet these saints, though they come so close to God, are not consumed by the holiness of God, do not perish in His judgment, for these saints have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to [His] sprinkled blood” (vs 24). In place of the fear that characterized the Lord’s approach in the old covenant, there may now be confidence in the presence of God. We understand that here the apostle works out for the church the meaning of the angel’s words to the two women on Easter morning.

Yet that reality, the chapter continues, does not mean that children of God may consider their relation with God always cooked and dried, always safe and OK. Yes, in the New Testament dispensation the saints of God have come to the city of the living God, may know their sins forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. But that reality gives no one a right to rest on his laurels. The apostle to the Hebrews adds straightaway this word of admonition: “See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking” (vs 25). Why not? At Mt Sinai God shook the earth; there was an earthquake that filled even the man Moses with fear. But God has promised (it’s recorded in the writings of Haggai the prophet): “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven” (vs 26). There comes, in other words, another earthquake, more, there comes a ‘heaven-quake’ too! And this shaking far out-does all previous quakings; here is judgment from God in its ultimate form. This is what John also saw in the Revelation shown to him: “...I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it; from His presence earth and sky fled away...” (Rev

20:11). Earth and sky together: both flee because of the throne of God, because of His seat of judgment, because God comes to judge all according to what each had done (cf vs 13). This final judgment is so final and ultimate and terrible too that the earth quakes altogether and the heavens quake so totally too, yes, quake so violently that both earth and sky flee away. So it is that John can see "...a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away..." (Rev 21:1). Here is fulfilled that word of Hebrews: "Yet once more [God] will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." It's that reality that gives so much force to what that apostle writes: "See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.... For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:25,29). *Such is the severity of God's Judgment that earth and heaven alike flee in the face of it.*

That being, then, the extent of the earthquake that awaits this world, the extent of the earthquake that awaits all who witness the return of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven, how imperative it is that we –who live in the New Testament era– take the apostle's words to heart! The angel of Mt 28 told the two women not to be afraid, not to be afraid even though the rocks were still possibly rolling down the hills around them, not to fear in the face of the earthquake, "for," said he, Jesus "is not here; He has risen", sinners can stand in the judgment of God. *But we are not the women of Mt 28!*

That is why the question becomes so imperative: how shall *you* feel when the earth beneath your feet so shakes at the return of the Judge that all the earth flees away? Yea, how shall *you* feel when the skies above quake out of sight? The saints after Pentecost, Paul and Silas in prison, *feared not* when the earth shook around them, *feared not because they understood and believed* the word of that heavenly messenger on Easter morning: Jesus has arisen. But you now? What is your reaction to the word of the angel? Whether you can face God on the day of His great judgment, whether you will be afraid when God on the last day shakes earth and heaven, depends on what you do with the word of the angel, depends on whether you *believe* the Christ to have risen from the dead or not. "Do not you be afraid"; it's a word that is ultimately true for the *believer* only.

The biggest earthquake is yet to come. Blessed are those who believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. For them is that biggest earthquake no cause for fear at all. It signals the new earth, the coming of the heavenly Jerusalem.