

The shy little girl shivers with anticipation as the princess approaches her and looks into her eyes with a smile.

The man begins to fumble in his pocket for the ring that will accompany his nerve-wracking question.

The woman's mind races as she opens her arms to hold her firstborn child.

The couple squeezes hands and gasps for breath as they stand at the front door of their dream, about to turn the sign to say Open.

There are certain rare moments that make the heart throb like a jackhammer, moments on which destiny hinges and hangs, on which the future turns and depends.

They are moments that burn themselves into the memory and change a person's life forever, moments full of terror and holiness and hope, moments of *fear and great joy*.

Easter is that moment for the world.

The empty tomb and the open future is so earth-shattering that the only way Matthew can think to convey it is to say there was a *great earthquake*.

Only Matthew among the gospel writers says this, and it is startling coming from his pen.

Christian tradition says that Matthew was a tax collector, and the no-nonsense, detailed, do-it-this-way, morally rigorous style of his gospel matches that profile.

Mark writes an adventure; Luke authors a vision of a radically alternative community; John showcases an art gallery; Matthew's gospel reads like an audit.

Yet when he gets here, to Jesus' cross and resurrection, Matthew's account turns fanciful and bizarre, a rampage of heaven's magic centered in two earthquakes.

Today's great quake is actually the aftershock.

Listen to Matthew's description of Jesus' death:

*Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.*

*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*

*The earth shook, and the rocks were split.*

*The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.*

*After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city, and appeared to many.*

This event of Jesus' death and resurrection, a connected, singular event with a double movement, causes an earthquake so deep and different that it doesn't kill people, it resurrects them.

The body count doesn't tabulate the suddenly dead, but the suddenly alive; God's holy city becomes a sacred Zombieland.

Heaven is breaking loose from both directions; the dead emerge from their tombs, after Jesus of course, all in good order, while an angel invades from the sky.

Easter fundamentally alters reality in a way and to an extent that no mere human can imagine much less orchestrate it; this is heavenly havoc beyond anything anyone could possibly be prepared for.

This is no longer a story about a wise teacher and the faithful discipleship of good behavior.

This is a raw, wild display of the unharnessed power of God.

Easter is the moment that makes the overwhelmed human heart throb like a jackhammer with *fear and great joy*, the moment we are confronted with the ultimate power not only beyond our control but beyond even the power of death's control: the power of life. Strong and frightening though it is, we can broker deals with death, and manage its predictable outcome.

We can guard the tomb with a reasonable confidence that trouble isn't coming from the inside. Easter, however, introduces something else altogether.

It shakes our world to the core, the world around us and the world within us, and our destiny that death renders so reliably and blandly predictable now takes a hairpin turn into a future so different our mind cannot begin to grasp it.

It is the dilemma and the delight of the new mother, the new business owner, the finger with the new ring on it.

It turns guards into dead men and grieving women into giddy witnesses.

It reduces soldiers to breathless fear and reshapes a funeral procession into a frantic, festive party parade.

What will it do to us?

We the church keep telling and re-telling the story because we still haven't fully gotten it yet.

In our defense, it has only been a couple thousand years, hardly enough time to sort it all out.

There are moments, yes, when we blaze forth with courage, confident that death is really not to be feared, unyielding even in the snarling face of it, confronting the powers of death and the world that guards them faithfully obedient to the double command, *Do not be afraid, go*.

There are times the church walks the streets of Haiti and the halls of power and speaks a bold word of altered reality, a word of justice and life and hope.

And there are moments we look around at the chaos beyond our control and the angels who defy our conceptions and categories, and we shake with fear and become like dead men.

We the church and we the people who comprise it, saints and sinners, half-alive and half-dead, have a mixed résumé of *fear and great joy*.

We are sometimes but not always sure that the powers at work beyond our careful choreography are to be trusted, or that they will be transformed by the greater power below us and above us, beyond us and within us, that splits the rocks and shatters the strangleholds of death's business-as-usual.

We still need to be told to tell; we still need angels and Christ himself to come to us before we can muster the courage to go.

So we gather at this table where Christ appears and says *Greetings*.

We come together and share Communion and community.

*Do not be afraid.*

Go forward, to the table, to the world, to the future.

Do not give in to the fear.

Death loses.

Life wins.

Trust the joy.