

For the people of St. Philip's  
The Great Vigil 2009/B  
Matthew 28: 1-10  
Maria Hoecker, preacher

A few years back, when we were in Sewanee at seminary, there was an earthquake. Have any of y'all been in an earthquake? This wasn't at all like the earthquake which Italy experienced this past week. Such terrible devastation we've seen this week of leveled communities. No, this earthquake in Sewanee was a very mild shake up, still, it shook me up. I think it was about 4:00 o'clock in the morning when it came upon us. I was sound asleep. It wasn't the vibration of the earth that woke me up, it was a strange sound. Something I'd never heard before.....the sound of the land rolling toward me. The sound of the trees vibrating, if sound could shimmer, that's what it sounded like. I'd never heard anything like it. Then the rattling came. The 120 year old house's timbers groaned. The quaking seemed to last forever, but it probably only lasted for a ten seconds at the most.

So much runs through your mind when you find yourself on shaky ground. Is this what I think it is? Where should I go to get away from it? Is my world about to collapse? What's happening to my neighbors? I guess it's all in what you're used to. I come from Kansas and have been trained to go down to a cellar when the sounds of sirens fill the air. Folks on the west coast hear that shimmering sound of vibrating earth and they know to get outside, I guess. But I didn't know what to do in the dark of that night.

Then as soon as the shake up came, it went. Everything was dead still. What just happened?! Once I realized that my own roof hadn't collapsed, I can remember sitting there in the dark imagining that all the glass windows in my two favorite campus chapels were probably shattered. But mostly I wondered if anyone had been hurt. I had no idea what news I might learn as dawn broke soon thereafter. With the day's first light, I learned that the glass houses and people of Sewanee were fine, but there had been a massive rockslide off of Monteagle Mountain that blocked the interstate between Chattanooga and Nashville. Indeed as I sat there in the darkness, I felt as though my sliding world had been rocked.

Tonight our world is about to get rocked again. We've arrived at The Great Vigil. Tonight's worship is an ancient one. There are records which refer to people celebrating the great Easter Vigil as early as the fourth century. We walk tonight in their footsteps.

We began this evening in a darkened Church, symbolizing the bleak darkness of

the empty tomb. We can only imagine what Mary Magdalen and Mary the mother of James and the other women might have felt when confronted with such starkness on that first Easter day. A great quake came and their world was rocked. The rock in front of the tomb was rolled away.

They did not know how the story was going to turn out. They came expecting to do the very last thing which they could do to honour the body of their friend, Jesus. Because of the previous day being the Sabbath, they were unable to anoint the body. They had to wait until now, the third day. It would have been a grim task, but it was one which they wanted to do because of the love they had for Jesus.

The women arrive at the tomb and get shook up. The rock is rolled away and they are frightened. But in the midst of the dark tomb, they find Light.

Tonight, outside in the cold emptiness, we kindled a new fire and experienced the warmth which can be found in shared company. The women at the tomb, even in their grief and confusion, were sent out to spread the Light. It was by going out of the tomb, being sent out to spread the news, that they found their friend, Jesus, along the way.

It's from that first flame that we light this Paschal Easter Candle. This candle which burns bright through Eastertide and at all of our funerals. This flame represents new life and it is through this Candle that the Light of a Risen Christ first enters the empty tomb of our darkened Church...dipped in the waters of baptism. In the midst of darkness and emptiness let there be light.

Just as the women found light in the darkness, so do we.

In our readings tonight we retell the story of salvation history, recounting those great stories from the Old Testament in which we remember how God was always reaching out to us to save us. All of these stories have a common theme.... humankind is continually slipping away from God. So much of the Old Testament tells the same story of God continually reaching out through the message of the prophets.

Ultimately, these stories are made complete in Jesus Christ. God, no longer sent a prophet to simply be a messenger, God leapt across the deep chasm which existed between humankind and God. Through Jesus Christ, bound as one by the Holy Spirit, God became one of us.

God took on the cruel cross, an instrument of oppression and torture, and God transformed the Cross into a means of hope and victory. God: the same Creator who made light from darkness, a world from nothing, our God overcame death so

that we too might live.

And the earth shook. A new world is offered to us. Jesus came back to forgive the very disciples who had forsaken him. This new world is about forgiveness, as it turns out, not vengeance. And the earth shook.

The Risen Christ picked up a piece of bread and ate it and you could see the nailprints in his hands. This new world is about life, as it turns out, not death. And the earth shook.

Tonight we welcome Evelyn Grace Huskins into our midst, a Child of God. Through living water, we baptized this child into the Light, saying the words that have been said by each of us, all of us, for nearly 2000 years. And the earth shook.

In the fifties, in China, there was a devastating earthquake. But as a result of the quake, a huge boulder was dislodged from a mountain thus exposing a great cache of wonderful artifacts from a thousand years ago. A new world suddenly became visible.

We see all things new again. God's new creation has already begun, those of us who have been shaken up in the middle of the night are being called out of the darkness. Now is the time to nail onto the cross all the pieces of our shattered world that lay at our feet. Paul is quite clear about this: all that debris is washed away in the deep water of baptism, the rubble is to be cast away on to the cross of Jesus Christ.

We are Easter people. Hopeful ones. Washed clean. With every baptism, our world is given new life, new purpose. We are called to be people of the light, even though this world still seems dark. We are people who live in New Time even though Old Time is still rumbling on all around us. Not only are we becoming new people ourselves, as we keep in step with the Holy Spirit, but the proclamation of the women running out of the tomb also beckons. We are called to move out into the world and shake things up. We are grace personified out in the world. Not by our works alone, but by our faith. Part of the challenge of Easter, and part of the particular challenge of Baptism, is to pray for wisdom and vision to see where God can and will make all things new. That, quite simply, is our mission....every baptized Christian, no matter our age, no matter our gifts, everyone of us is called by grace to be bearers of the Light of Christ. Thanks be to God.

When the world rocked and the stone was rolled away, the women got the first glimpse of a new world, it came in a flash of lightning. In that flash of brilliant

light we too see a world where death doesn't have the last word, a world where injustice is made right, and suffering is redeemed by a living God.

God knows. God knows suffering. God knows loss. God knows new life. God knows that this new life will rock our world.  
amen.