

“God’s Earthshaking Throat-Clearing,  
With the Simple, Yet Profound Rendezvous in Galilee”

Matthew 28:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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At 2:25 a.m. on Sunday, December 16, 2001, I was awakened when our then one-year-old dog growled from his place on our bed. He growled a second time, and finished the growl with a low “ruff.” I listened for some unusual sounds for a few moments, heard none, patted him on the back, told him it seemed like nothing, and we all went back to sleep. The next day on the news we heard that an earthquake strong enough to be felt in the area of its epicenter had developed in Oklahoma County, about 90 miles from our house. Someone might tell me that a dog cannot sense something like a mild earthquake at a distance of 90 miles. I have wondered since then, though, if he possibly did sense slight seismic activity, which a human at that distance could not sense, asleep or awake. Otherwise, the time coincidence was certainly strange.

You can rightly argue, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not about a dog sensing fairly slight earth tremors at a distance of 90 miles.” Of course it’s not. But what if Matthew is saying something to the effect that the earthquake is a way God is hoping to gain people’s attention, like someone at a party or in a meeting clears her throat in an effort to gain a spouse, friend, or associate’s attention across a table or in a group. You know how that sounds: “Ugagagahummm!”

I am no seismic geologist, but a little internet research has helped me learn that an average of 55 earthquakes per year can be detected in Oklahoma on seismic equipment. On average, only three or four of them are strong enough to be perceived by humans, less than one tenth of the total.

I’m not about to tell you that earthquakes happen because God is trying to get human beings’ attention. I am wondering, though, if the storyteller Matthew is suggesting, like some of the Old Testament writers, that God wants our attention, and God surprisingly and mysteriously draws near to get our attention. Hold that thought.

Some say that the earthquake mentioned in Matthew’s story happens as a heavenly messenger arrives; and that messenger arrives for the necessary purpose of dislodging the boulder which has sealed Jesus’ tomb. The earthquake explains how the boulder got rolled away. That’s one angle to interpreting the story.

Another (and equally important) angle is understanding that, when people told stories about God doing something among God’s people, often God is described as attempting to gain people’s attention. A phenomenon like an earthquake will gain your attention. So, as much as Matthew may want to say, “Look, an earthquake happened because a messenger of God showed up to dislodge the boulder,” it’s equally important to see, in this situation, how *the earthquake is a signal and an invitation for people to look around and to look within*. God becomes present for a purpose. From this particular interpretive angle, the earthquake, which Matthew describes, is God’s throat-

clearing to gain people's attention: "Ugagagahummm!" And it's earthshaking! (cf. Exodus 19:18; 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:11-12; Psalm 114:7)

Understanding that much, it troubles me that my dog may be more aware of slight seismic tremors when sleeping on my bed than I am about God's holy presence drawing near to seek my attention in life, in death, and even in life-beyond-death.

Today is the day Christians – as disciples and followers of Jesus – celebrate the crucified Jesus's resurrection-beyond-death by God's power. Those who come to worship today may have four or more different desires when thinking about the preaching of Jesus' resurrection. One desire goes like this: "I want the preacher to explain the story as I believe it ought to be explained." A second desire: "Preacher, tell the story using Scripture, but don't try to con me with your own either liberal or fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture. In other words, be sure you take seriously my genuine life-and-faith questions." A third desire is similar to the second: "Preacher, tell the story from Scripture and leave me room for my own perspective." A fourth desire says, "Preacher, explore the Gospel message of resurrection in a way that helps open wider the doors and windows of my life."

Today let's consider that fourth desire, in particular, and explore how Jesus's resurrection is an avenue through which God's Spirit opens wide the doors and windows of each person's life. Remember: *The earthquake related to Jesus's resurrection can serve as a signal and an invitation for people to look around and to look within.*

Reynolds Price has been an author and a Professor of English and American Literature at Duke University for years. You may know that he is a cancer survivor whose spinal cancer and medical treatment left him paralyzed from the waist down since the mid-1980s. While I've read a few of his works, I've neither met nor heard Professor Price speak in person. In 1998, when he was sixty-five years old, his novel, *Roxanna Slade*, was published. It's a fictional memoir, narrated by the main character, Ms. Roxanna Slade, as she looks back over her life of ninety-three years.

You may ask, "Why, in an Easter sermon, would you bring up a fictional story told by a fictional ninety-three year old woman?" Primarily because the fabric of Roxanna Slade's story is spun from the same textiles that make up the fabric of the lives of Jesus' disciples long ago and that make up the fabric of your life and mine today.

After Roxanna Slade tells of love, tragedy, grief, struggle, depression, perseverance, and of being a daughter-in-law to a strong-willed mother-in-law, she says this: "With all the pain and waste I've known in my own life and the lives that touched mine . . . I've never been able to shake that knowledge that came with my childhood. Children seldom are fooled, I've found, about main things like truth and what's right . . . But however hard I've slashed away in my bad times at what I knew, I haven't succeeded in felling the trunk of that certainty that came into the world with me . . . Even TV religion, all of it calling itself some brand of *Christian*, hasn't quite shut me down. To be sure it's bolstered my weak blood pressure to dangerous heights and

sickened my stomach with its hatred and lies. But once I get calmed down, if I lie in my own bed in the dark and look straight up . . . (looking really) straight up . . . beyond the ceiling, I can almost always start to feel again that calm first fact from my childhood. And then the whole great hoop of whatever it is, gorgeous or dreadful as it may be, starts turning in the night sky above me bearing everything that has ever been – the painful and the graceful, which have touched me in my own life and in others in theirs, including the positive life-efforts of people liked Eleanor Roosevelt and Gandhi and more . . .” (pgs.300-301).

When the character Roxanna Slade, through the author Reynolds Price, tells of her life she answers the call *to look around and to look within*. And when she describes her awareness of “the whole great hoop turning in the night sky bearing everything that has ever been,” she is speaking of the same life which the Resurrected Jesus says disciples experience in “Galilee.” *“Galilee” is a “code word” for where life takes place with work and play, with learning and producing, loving and resting, with enduring and with shaking one’s head unable to understand, with worshiping, forgiving, serving.*

Oh, there are locations where religious gatherings occur, like the Temple in Jerusalem or the Presbyterian building at 1100 Carter Creek Parkway in Bryan, Texas; but life-made-new-day-by-day is known as simple and profound, with wonder and mystery, with trust and joy. It’s known that way in “Galilee.” That’s where Jesus crucified and resurrected rendezvous with persons daily – meeting, welcoming, inviting each one continually to look around and look within: “Ugagagahummm!” When we answer the call to look around and look within, we realize there are power-seeking betrayals; there are fear-filled denials; there are crucifixion cruelties; there are dead-end grave-gardens; *yet at the rendezvous in “Galilee” of which Jesus reminds us, we experience God in Jesus Christ mysteriously and even surprisingly present and alive right where we live, working to make life new with resurrection-power, no matter how tough the challenge, how deep the heartbreak, or how on-going the agony.*

In order to hear God’s “Ugagagahummm!” reminding us to trust simple, profound grace in the presence of Christ in Galilee, it never really requires a literal earthquake to gain our attention! In a variety of ways and encounters, when we look within and look around, Jesus Christ meets us and others both on the way to Galilee, and once we are there.

-- All honor and praise be to God!