

And The Earth Shook

Matthew 28:1-15

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*Now after the sabbath,
toward dawn of the first day of the week,
Mary Magdalene and the other Mary
went to the grave. . .*

*and, behold,
the earth
shook. . .
or something.*

Wonder what makes the earth shake like that?
It fell my lot last week
to take Pappy's clothes to the funeral home.
Mama or someone had already picked them out
and had them spread on their bed.
Still,
I couldn't resist looking in his closet.

Unlike in his son's closet,
in my father's closet
the shirts were hanging together in one place,
suits in another,
sport coats in another,
ties in another,
with old boxes stacked neatly on the shelf above
and shined shoes in a row below.

The smell of clean laundry
mixed with the smell of old boxes
and the residue of cigar smoke
brought back a lifetime of memories.

One memory in particular stands out. . .
a memory of more than forty years duration now.

At least,
I think I was no more than eight or ten at the time.
I was looking for something in Pappy's closet.

I don't at all remember now what it was.
Maybe I was looking for something
 he had sent me to get.
In any event,
 tucked way back in the corner,
 I found an old shoe box.
In the shoe box,
 mixed with yellowing discharge papers,
 and letters from the Department of Defence,
 there were some old photographs.
They were black and white of course.
It was before the days of color photos.
Their edges were curled.

 The photographs were of dead people. . .
 dead people with no clothes on.
In some of the photographs,
 the corpses were piled on top of each other.
In other photographs,
 the corpses were in rows.
In all of the photographs
 the corpses were nothing but skin and bone.

I ran with the photographs to ask my mother what they were.

She wiped her hands on her apron,
 gently took the pictures from me,
 looked at them,
 then looked at me.

There was a pause.
I took the pause to mean
 she was wondering if I were old enough.
After a while she said,

 "These were taken in a concentration camp.
 Your father fought in the war
 to make them stop doing things like that."

Then she handed the pictures back to me.
There was another pause.
Finally she said,

 "You must put the pictures back in the box
 and never tell your father you have seen them."

I never did.

The earth stood still that day.

*At the tomb of our Lord
an angel or something
descended from heaven
to roll away the stone
and to bring a message from God.*

*The sight of it made the guards shake
like
an earthquake
then stand stone still
like
dead men.*

Strange, isn't it,
how memories string together,
sometimes out of sequence
and sometimes spanning a decade or two.
The smell of freshly laundered shirts
with a residue of cigar smoke
will do that for you
especially if the smell is
mixed with that of old boxes
with pictures of nude corpses.

At least a decade after the discovery of the pictures
one night Pappy got a phone call from out of the blue.
It was one of the men from his old army command.
Pappy was polite as Pappy would be
but only just barely.
They exchanged a few niceties
about children and work
and maybe the candidates for president that year.
When Pappy hung up
he muttered some obscenities under his breath
slapped his leg in disgust
and walked out of the room
in the fashion of his long stride.

Once again,
I needed the wisdom of my mother
to understand the character of my father.

"What was that about?" I asked.
I was a teen by then and interested in such things.

"Your father found out that man
and several others in his command
executed some German prisoners
they had taken just after the war."

The earth stood still that day.

"Fear not,"
the angel said to the women.

"Keep them afraid,"
said the high priests of conventional wisdom.

"Come and see the empty grave,"
the messenger commanded.

"Say the body was stolen,"
said the purveyors of logic's lunacy.

"Go tell the disciples death does not have the last word,"
was the message from God.

"We'll cover your tracks to keep them in the dark about death,"
said those who wish to keep the people under control.

Do you see the conflicting Easter orders?

*Fear not.
Come see.
Go Tell.*

Those are the Easter messages from God.

*Fear.
Deception.
Secrecy.*

*Those are the Easter messages from planet earth.
It is important to know
the world need not be controlled
by fear, deception, and secrecy. . .
neither fear, deception, and secrecy
nor their partner death.*

Clean shirts and musty boxes
were not all there was in my father's closet
that brought a flood of memories.

There were also the shoes
arranged in a neat row:

There were shoes for Sunday.
They were first in line if you read them from left to right.
It was important to him
to study every Sunday in the school of the church
and to worship every Sunday in the sanctuary of the church
and to work every day in the mission of the church
and to pray every day to the Lord of the church.
He insisted that the church be faithful.
To that end,
he was faithful to the church.
By such faithfulness the earth shook.

*As the women were running to tell the disciples what the angel said,
Jesus himself stopped the women and said,*

*"Go tell the disciples
I'll meet them in Galilee
to show them they have no need to be afraid."*

Just beside his shoes for going to church
there were shoes for going to the barn.
They were second in line
and just before the shoes for going to play golf.
"You boys each raise a calf," Pappy said to my older brother and
me one year.

"When they're fat
I'll buy them from you at fair market value.
Then you can send the money to Mrs. Smythe in Japan.
She's a missionary over there."
For the price of two cows,
in those days just after the war,
by his calculation,
you could send a Japanese student to seminary for a year.

We raised the calves.
He bought them from us.
We sent the money to Mrs. Smythe.
The man went to seminary. . .
he and a half dozen or so others after him.

The earth shook.

*Jesus said to the women,
"Go tell disciples*

*I'll meet them where they live and work
and they'll know my way is a better way. . .
a better way to live and work."*

Speaking of shoes for going to the barn,
they reminded me of a time much later. . .
remember how memories jump across decades. . .
later he said
as a spin off of a famous proverb,

"Give hungry people a meal
and they'll soon be hungry again.
Give them a cow and some chickens,
and they'll never be hungry."

With his considerable knowledge of such things,
Pappy saw to it
that hundreds of cows and thousands of chickens
were given to hungry people all over the world. . .
cows and chickens and ducks and goats and sheep
and rabbits and pigs and geese.

By such giving the earth shook.

*As the women clung to his feet,
Jesus said to them,*

*"Go tell disciples I'll meet them in their home town
to show them there is a lot of giving left to do."*

I was an adult
somewhere past the middle of my years
as I stood gazing into my father's closet
being washed in a flood of memories.
I have a graduate degree in Theology now.
I spend up to twenty hours a week
studying and writing
about what I believe to be the truth of Jesus Christ.
I have almost twenty-five years of preaching under my belt.
Only recently, however,
have I begun to see the simple complexity
of the faith connections in my father's heart and mind.

For him,
and now for me,
there is a connection
between the pictures in that musty box

and having his sons
participate in sending students to seminary in Japan.

Sending Japanese students to seminary
was my father's way of assuring
that what happened in those pictures never happens again.

For my father,
and now for me,
there is a connection
between the executions carried out by men under my father's command
and my father's giving farm animals to hungry people.

Helping hungry people feed themselves
was my father's way of assuring
that people need never be controlled by fear of pain and death.

So we gathered last week at the cemetery.
At the cemetery
we heard the preacher read the words of Jesus:
"Because I live, you live also."

And the earth shook beneath our feet.