

Easter Vigil Homily

Feelings You Never Forget - Matthew 28:1-10

Has anyone here ever witnessed a space launch in person? In Bill Moyer's book 'A World of Ideas', Jacob Needleman remembers: "I was an observer at the launch of Apollo 17 in 1975. It was a night launch, and there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer, wisecracking, and waiting for this 35-story-high rocket. He remarked – “the countdown came, and then the launch. The first thing you see is the extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at. Everything is illuminated with this light. Then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a WHOOOOOSH! Then loud humming sound that enters right into you.”

(I was once at the Winston Salem Drag Race competition in Columbus with a similar experience. The cars start their engines and during the rev up, you can feel the thrum of the engine in your chest. The sound required ear plugs to prevent hearing damage and you can feel the heat from the flaming exhaust though you are several hundred yards away in the stands).

Now – back at the launch, Needleman continued: “You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place, as this thing goes up and up. The first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it. And then there’s total silence.”

What do you think it would have been like to observe Jesus’ resurrection from the grave? What if some entrepreneur had understood when Jesus said that he would rise from the dead? What if he sought an opportunity to make some easy money from this event? What if he set some bleachers in front of the tomb and charged people admission for watching? What if he advertised in the Jerusalem Chronicle and a huge crowd showed up to watch?

I suspect they would have experienced something similar to Jacob Needleman’s experience at the launch. People would have arrived cynical. But then, a blinding light followed by momentary silence before a deafening noise and Jesus would have stepped from the grave alive. And when they saw Jesus alive, their eyes would have been as big as saucers, their jaws would dropped. A sense of wonder would probably have filled everyone watching. The feelings would never be forgotten.

Matthew’s account is the most dramatic of the resurrection narratives. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb; no reason is given. The earthquake takes place, and the angel rolls back the stone....the stage is now set for a marvelous event. The resurrection has taken place already, while the tomb was sealed, and the tomb is empty. It’s never described anywhere in Scripture, presumably because no one saw Jesus exit the tomb. Not a single person witnessed the moment when Jesus came forth that first Easter morning - but many have experienced it. No one can explain the resurrection, but many felt its effects.

The earth felt the effects - “Suddenly there was a violent earthquake” (Matt. 28:2). It shook, it reeled and rocked, the ground quaked, the rocks erupted, the earth cracked, the olive trees waved their twisted limbs. Nature was aroused. The quake attests to the cosmic significance of the event.

The angel felt the effects - “...an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached [the tomb] - his appearance like lightning, and his robe as white as snow.” He rolled away the stone **not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in**. The angel sat on the rock that had been rolled away indicating the triumph of the completed work.

The guards felt the effects - “The guards were so shaken from fear of him that they became like dead men.” They shook, in their sandals, longer than the ground itself shook. They were scared stiff.

The women felt the effects – “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb,” to anoint Jesus’ body with spices. As they were walking they were concerned about who would move the stone for them. On seeing the stone rolled away from the opening of the tomb and hearing the angel proclaim that Jesus was not there, that He had been raised, they were filled with wonder and joy. The good news of His resurrection became their message to share. Everyone present that day felt the effect of the resurrection.

I’ve been in an earthquake, not a big one, but an earthquake nonetheless. I was home one afternoon, napping in my recliner - I think it was sometime in the 1980s. I was awakened by the rattling of the glass doors on my fireplace – it got my attention. Later in the day, the TV news reported an earthquake on the New Madrid Fault. And a few days later, I checked on a rental house I owned in Fairborn and saw a crack down the outside wall following the mortar line from top to bottom.

Easter is a major earthquake that shook the whole world. It got everyone’s attention. At Easter, God did all he could to the world. And the earth shook. You don’t explain that; you experience it; you feel it; it goes right through you.

(excerpted from Rev Rick Ezell, Pastor of First Baptist Greer, South Carolina)

When the stone was rolled away from the tomb that Easter morning and the earth shook, we got our first glimpse of a new world where death doesn’t have the last word. It’s what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary felt when they learned that Jesus had risen. They departed “quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy.” They went to the tomb expecting to find a dead man whose body they would anoint. Instead they found an empty tomb and Jesus alive!

When they saw him their only response was to fall at his feet in worship. “When they saw Him, they worshiped.”

When you and I encounter Jesus, that's Easter - that's the presence that moves us and touches us. Easter should make us want to fall at Jesus' feet in gratitude and praise for what he has done. That's something you don't explain and never forget. You feel it - it goes right through you.

The risen Jesus appears to the two women as they are on their way to tell the disciples. These women are the first witnesses to his resurrection. The words "Do not be afraid" recall the words of the angel. Then Jesus himself commissions the women to inform the disciples that they will see him in Galilee.

Jesus makes use of flawed people in his mission. He wants the disciples to know that they will meet him in Galilee. What is so amazing about that is that Jesus forgives their failures. He even calls them his "brothers." They betrayed him and deserted him at the time of his trial and death. But now he restores them as his emissaries and trusts them once again to represent him.

And so it is with us. We are all like the disciples - flawed persons in so many ways - who have failed him often as individuals and as a church. I know I am flawed. But Jesus continues to call us back to follow him into the world as his disciples.

(excerpted from Dr. Arland J. Hultgren, Luther Seminary, St Paul MN)

I pray that I may be like the person on the cross next to Jesus who professed his faith in him then and there and was welcomed into paradise on that day. Jesus is truly risen!!

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