

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
On Solid Ground
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Exodus 14:21-27; Matthew 28:1-10

It was just after 5pm when the earth began to shake. The earthquake lasted for only twenty seconds, but the damage exceeded \$10 billion. The epicenter was near Loma Prieta, 50 miles south of San Francisco. Eighteen-thousand homes and twenty-five-hundred businesses were damaged. Roads were torn apart and a portion of the Bay Bridge in Oakland collapsed. While some of the damage could have been expected, the extent of the damage was exceptional. What made it as bad as it was, was a process called liquification. Liquification is what happens when loosely packed soils are shaken so violently that water that is normally trapped in the soil, is suddenly released and pushed upwards causing the ground to lose its cohesion... and the earth becomes like mud, or perhaps like the beach when your feet sink into the sand. In some ways this is more frightening than the shaking itself because it is a reminder that the one thing we believe to be solid in our lives, the earth beneath our feet, can in fact give way and we can sink down into it. This geologic phenomenon kept coming back to me again and again this week as I read this resurrection story. The giving way and the liquification of the ground seemed to be the perfect metaphor for what the followers of Jesus had experienced on the day of his death. Let me explain.

The disciples had followed Jesus for three years. During that time, they knew he was the one dependable person in their lives. He was their leader, their teacher, their healer, their exorcist, their everything. He was fulfilling ancient prophecies. He was gathering larger and larger crowds. He was creating a new community in which all persons were accepted, loved, and cherished. And in their unpredictable world, a world in which one never knew what Rome or the leaders in Jerusalem might do, they knew that they could depend on Jesus. He was their rock and their fortress. But then the earth shook. Jesus was arrested, tried, crucified, and buried. It was as if the very ground beneath their feet had liquefied. All their hopes and dreams were as shattered as those homes in the Bay area. There was nothing solid in their lives. And even when they came to the tomb and were told by an angel that Jesus was alive, they were still shaking. I say this because they were filled with “fear and great joy.” Think for a moment when you have been filled with this mix of emotions...you shake...you tremble. And so, they ran. They ran through soil still not yet solid.

It was in their running that Jesus met them. Note carefully, they were not looking for Jesus. They were not expecting to see Jesus. All they were trying to do was to get back to their friends with some unbelievable news, that perhaps Jesus might meet them later in Galilee as he had promised. But then suddenly, out of nowhere it would seem, Jesus meets them. It was Jesus who knew they were shaking. It was Jesus who knew that they needed something solid on which to cling. It was Jesus who loved them too much to allow them to fear. And so, he meets them. Their

reaction is instantaneous. They fall down and take hold of his feet. They take hold of the one thing that once had been, and was once again, the only solid thing in their lives. They took hold of Jesus and offered him their words of praise and amazement. They took hold of the physically present feet of their risen friend. They grabbed hold, stopped shaking and gave thanks.

I don't know about you, but this past year has seemed like one in which the world shook and life liquified under me. The ground shook with a pandemic that took hundreds of thousands of lives. It shook with calls for racial justice following the deaths of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor and others. It shook with an election and election aftermath that starkly divided our nation. It shook with an attack on our capitol. It shook with lockdowns and lost jobs. It shook with mass shootings and the deaths of Peace officers. And in the process of all that shaking, the ground beneath us liquified. All that we thought of as normal vanished. We were isolated. We fought over toilet paper and cleaning supplies. We could no longer visit family, friends or our favorite places to eat. We had to wear masks everywhere as the invisible virus lingered in the air. The earth beneath our feet had liquefied. Yet there was one in whom I knew I could trust. There was one thing I could remember every day, that my redeemer lives; that Jesus Christ comes to meet me every morning saying that life and love win; hate and death lose.

Jesus was and is the one solid thing on which we can all cling to because in him we know that love and life win. Love and life win because God refused to allow hate and death to be victorious. Love and life win because Jesus is raised. And so we too can cling to him because he is not dead but alive. We can cling to him because he is not simply an ancient teacher but a living Lord. We can cling to him because he is not simply a spirit but a resurrected human being. We can cling to him because he lives...and in his living we know that we can and will live as well. So this Easter Sunday, allow Jesus to stop our shaking and remind us, that in him, we are on solid ground.