

“When the Ground Shakes,”
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/5/26

Recently my husband Tom and I were remembering a computer printout that hung on the door of a basement office in the belly of the Penn library, where we worked together: “8-23-11,” the printout said, in big white letters. “Never forget.” The words were inscribed over a picture of a white plastic table, the cheap kind, sitting in the middle of someone’s lawn and surrounded by four similarly generic white plastic chairs. Except one of those chairs was on its side in the grass. In the true spirit of “never forgetting,” whoever printed out the meme left it on their office door for years.

What we were never forgetting was an earthquake. Who remembers it? One August afternoon in 2011, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake rumbled from the earth near Mineral, Virginia, about halfway between Richmond and Charlottesville. Those of us who were here in Philadelphia felt the shake, a rather unfamiliar feeling for Pennsylvanians. When it happened I was at work in the Rare Book and Manuscript library at Penn, sorting collection materials in a big open workroom on the fifth floor.

It was a typical afternoon in the library, and then all of a sudden the bookcases that were bolted to the floor started swaying, gently, back and forth, back and forth. “Was that... could that have been an earthquake?” My coworkers and I looked around at each other in surprise. Someone hopped on their computer to look it up and confirmed for us that we had in fact felt an earthquake. Strange. But also, over just as quickly as it had begun. I don’t think any of the books even fell off the shelves in the workroom. We all had a good laugh and then just sort of – went back to what we were doing, almost as if it had never happened. Hence the meme with the fallen over lawn chair: never forget.

I was joking about this experience with a friend who grew up in Seattle, and for her, earthquakes are no laughing matter. She remembers earthquake drills in school, everyone rushing to get their backs up against the wall, or to get under their desks, depending on the type of classroom: you need to protect yourself from falling debris. In that same vein, my friend also recalled that her dad gave her and her sisters hard hats to keep in their rooms when they were kids, for head protection in the event of a quake. And she said that to this day, she and her husband disagree on where to place the bed in their bedroom. As an East Coaster, *he* thinks the bed can go anywhere. But it is deeply ingrained in her that the bed absolutely cannot live under a window. You would not want the window to shatter on you if an earthquake were to happen while you slept.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that on the first day of the week, as Mary and Mary, two of Jesus’s disciples and in fact, according to the gospels, Jesus’s patrons, his providers – as Mary and Mary were going to visit Jesus’s tomb, the ground shook beneath them. “Suddenly there was a great earthquake,” Matthew says. Out of nowhere, the earth rumbles; an angel of the Lord descends, with clothes as white as snow and a face like lightning; and the stone that had sealed Jesus’s tomb – literally sealed it, for Matthew tells us that the Roman governor Pilate had dispatched a guard of soldiers to make the tomb secure, to use clay or perhaps wax to fix the stone in place over the entrance to the tomb and then to keep watch outside it, to make sure no one could enter and take Jesus’s body to claim he had been resurrected – on the first day of the week, the earth quakes, those soldiers quake as the ground trembles beneath them, and that sealed-up stone rolls away. That sealed-up stone rolls away to reveal the entrance to an empty tomb. “He is not here,” the angel reports. “Jesus is not here, for he has been raised, as he said.”

At the moment of Jesus’s resurrection, the earth shakes. The resurrection of Jesus is literally a seismic event. And in fact Matthew has also reported an earthquake at the moment of Jesus’s crucifixion. The sky grew dark when Jesus hung on the cross, Matthew says. And as Jesus breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and the earth shook, really shook, hard enough to do more than knock over lawn chairs – hard enough to split rocks, hard enough to open the graves of the saints.

Matthew reports that after Jesus’s resurrection, some of these saints get up out of their graves and start walking around Jerusalem. I don’t know what sense to make of that either, but it’s a good reminder that, in the words of New Testament scholar Matthew Skinner, “we shouldn’t pretend that Easter isn’t pretty weird.”¹ Suffice it to say, in

Matthew, Jesus's death shakes the ground. In Matthew, Jesus's resurrection shakes the ground. The power of God at work in the world shakes the very earth.

And though we live in a place where earthquakes are a rare occurrence, we may sometimes feel on shaky ground ourselves. Dr. Pauline Boss, a veteran psychologist who coined the term "ambiguous loss" to refer to losses in our lives that remain unclear and without resolution, where resolution may, in fact, never be achieved; in the midst of the pandemic Dr. Boss wrote a book called *The Myth of Closure*, in which she discusses the ambiguous losses we faced while this tiny virus upended our lives. Ambiguous losses of that time: the loss of safety and health for self and family, the loss of routines, the loss of freedom, the loss of community rituals, the loss of dreams for the future; her list goes on. But the loss she named that continues to stick with me, the ambiguous loss she calls the ultimate loss, is "the loss of trust in the world as a safe and predictable place."²

The loss of trust in the world as a safe and predictable place. The world seems to be at a constant low-grade rumble these days. Even after the pandemic the unprecedented times just keep coming. As we try to process the constant barrage of news – news that can make it seem like war and violence are winning the day, like greed and prejudice have the upper hand – as we try to process all that is changing around us, shaky ground never quite stabilizes. We might feel like one of those plastic lawn chairs, about ready to topple over, or worse, like we're standing beneath a window, waiting for glass to shatter down on our heads.

But the good news of the resurrection is that though we may lose our sense of the world as a safe and predictable place, though the ground beneath us may seem shaky and unstable, our God also has the power to shake the ground. And when God shakes the ground, unprecedented things happen. When God shakes the ground, God gives God's very self up to death on a cross to save us from death's power. When God shakes the ground, the powers that be quake in their boots like the guards of Jesus's tomb quaking at the sight of the angel. When God shakes the ground, a man who is supposed to be dead walks right out of a tomb that is supposed to be sealed tight.

When God shakes the ground, it is to pronounce judgement on the death-dealing powers of this world. When God shakes the ground, it is to break open new possibilities for life, true and abundant life, true and abundant life unbound from the fear of death, unbound from the fear of anyone or anything who would wield death's power. God shakes the ground and gives us new life and unbinds us from our fear, from our fear of anyone who would wield death's power in order to oppress or control, to silence or to make small, to dehumanize or destabilize. When God shakes the ground, death itself is swallowed up in final victory, and we are free.

What are we to do with all this freedom? We may want to start by getting a hard hat. As Annie Dillard says in her book *Teaching A Stone to Talk*: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."³

God shook the earth and rolled the stone away, releasing Jesus from the tomb. God shakes the earth and draws us out also – to be people who defy death, people who challenge death's grip on the world, people who live abundant lives, lives characterized by the mercy and grace God offers to us. Though the powers of hell may trouble the earth, we do not tremble. Christ is risen – and with our hard hats firmly secured, we are free to follow him into resurrection life.

1. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-281-10-14>
2. Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*, Norton, 2022.
3. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, Harper Perennial, 1988.