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Study guide

Quakes, fear and joy

By Robert C. Blezard

As much as we try to create a life path that is smooth and steady, accidents occur, problems crop up, disease ravages, natural disasters strike, and on and on. It seems as if trouble is always around the corner. Kind of like an earthquake, which can happen anytime and without warning. But we know as people of faith that no matter what calamity befalls us, God is with us and helps us get our lives in order.

EXERCISE 1: EARTHQUAKES IN THE BIBLE

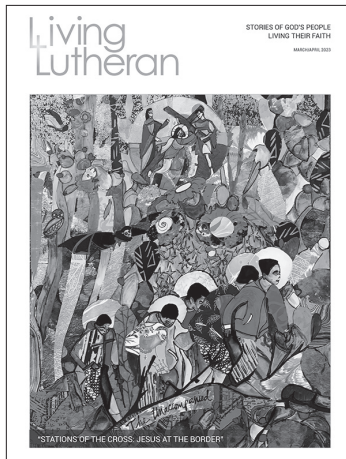
The earthquake that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary encountered when they went to Jesus' tomb (Matthew 28:2) accompanied the remarkable news that Jesus had risen. But that wasn't the only earthquake in Matthew. As Jesus breathed his last while on the cross, "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" (Matthew 27:51). Review Matthew 27:51 and 28:2 and discuss:

- What is the context—what is happening to the people in these stories?
- What is God up to and why?
- How does the earthquake reveal something about the presence of God?
- What do the people learn from the earthquake?
- How does God accompany God's people in the earthquake?
- Though frightening, how do earthquakes, in the end, accomplish the work of God?
- In fact, whenever they are mentioned in the Bible, earthquakes reveal the presence and power of God. Below are several other instances. Review and discuss using the questions above.
 - 1 Kings 19:11—God comes to Elijah in his moment of despair.
 - Ezekiel 38:19—God defends Israel.
 - Acts 16:26—God frees Paul and Silas from jail.
 - Revelation 6:12—The lamb opens the sixth seal.

EXERCISE 2: EARTHQUAKES

An earthquake is a natural disaster quite unlike hurricanes, volcanoes, floods, drought or even tornadoes, for which there is usually some warning to give people a chance to prepare. Earthquakes can strike at any time, which makes them especially terrifying. Moreover, they can be mild—a tremor—or incredibly destructive, such as February's earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Discuss:

- What do natural disasters have in common?



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- How do they disrupt our lives? How do we cope? How do we put our lives back together?
- What natural disasters have your region or state suffered? What happened? Was there a warning? How did you prepare? What kind of damage was caused? How did you recover?
- What has been your personal experience with natural disasters?
- Have you ever lived through an earthquake? What was that like?
- How is an earthquake unlike other natural disasters?

EXERCISE 3: LIFE'S EARTHQUAKES

Just as earthquakes can come without warning and disrupt our lives, so does misfortune visit all of us from time to time. “Earthquakes” may come in the form of job loss, a medical diagnosis, loss of a loved one, accident, etc. But no matter what befalls us, God is with us and helps us through. Discuss.

- Why are life’s “earthquakes” inevitable for everyone?
- What earthquakes have you lived through? What happened? How did you cope? Who or what helped you get through it?
- Where was God in your earthquake? How did God help you recover?
- In what ways might you have been better off or found joy following the earthquake?
- Can you, in retrospect, see how God worked through your earthquake and recovery?

EXERCISE 4: “WORK FOR GOOD”

Paul writes in Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Considering the earthquakes that we experience in life, discuss:

- What does Paul’s message mean to you? How does it make you feel?
- Talk about an occasion when you experienced this—where something good came out of a situation that perhaps started out challenging.
- What does this teaching reveal about the workings of God?
- Are there any situations that God cannot use for eventual good?
- How does this teaching give us hope in the midst of life’s earthquakes?
- Can you talk about a time when God used an earthquake to change your life for the better?

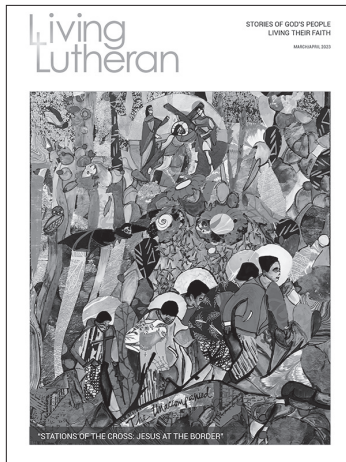
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What earthquakes have you endured in your life? Who has been present with you through the worst? How has God used the earthquake to restore you and bring joy?
- Catholic author and teacher Richard Rohr says there are three stages in every crisis we endure: order, disorder and reorder. In other words, crisis disrupts our order and we must reorder our lives again. And it's in the reordering that we often experience God's presence to give us growth and strength. Explore how this model of "order, disorder, reorder" has worked in crises you or your congregation have faced.
- Life is full of earthquakes—troubles and woes. It's inevitable. Knowing this truth, how can we as people of God position ourselves so that when the earthquakes come we will be as prepared as we can be? With what promises of God can we fortify ourselves in good times, so that when trouble comes we will have strength to get through the bad times?
- Just as dawn brings an end to even the darkest nights, so, too, crises generally come to an end. What crises have you endured that ended with a dawn that was welcome, refreshing and joyful?
- Are there any crises in your life or in the world where God's grace is absent? How can this knowledge give us strength and hope amid trouble? How does God work behind the scenes to bring about good? Can joy reign?



QUAKES, FEAR AND JOY

By Lisa A. Smith

I'd always skimmed over the earthquake in Matthew's resurrection story (28:1-10) until I was in "a big one." I live in Alaska. There hadn't been "a big one" in my part of the state since Good Friday 1964, when a 9.2 shaker on the Richter scale destroyed homes, killed dozens and forced the relocation of Southcentral Alaska coastal towns decimated by tidal waves.

Scientists warned there would eventually be another big one here. I was making breakfast for my children in 2018 when it hit—a 7.1 quake. I was downstairs with the 2-year-old when the shaking started. I knew I was supposed to shelter in place—stop moving!—but my 5-year-old was somewhere upstairs alone, and he started screaming. I was filled with terror. Bookshelves flung their contents; photos sailed off the mantle. The shaking was the hardest I'd ever felt, and it just kept going.

I grabbed my toddler and tried to run upstairs, but the shaking made it difficult to walk. A massive chandelier was swinging wildly above my head, and I saw the folly in climbing the stairs under it while holding a toddler. Glass shattered upstairs. My 5-year-old was still screaming. Was he hurt? I was screaming. We were all afraid.

THE EASTER STORY IS ONE OF INTERWOVEN FEAR AND JOY—THE SAME IS TRUE IN OUR LIVES.

After less than a minute of shaking, which felt like an hour, everything was still. I went upstairs and stopped short: a sea of broken glass filled the hall and bathroom floor. A wall-mounted bathroom mirror had shattered and sent shards throughout the hall, nearly into my son's bedroom. My son, who I thought might have been in the bathroom, was safe on his bedroom floor. I felt a moment of joy amid the terror.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who walked to the tomb went there expecting death. They were already traumatized by the terror of seeing their beloved Jesus beaten and executed. Then the earth began to quake, and they were afraid all over again.

Instead of broken glass, they saw blinding light and an angel, who shone with painful brightness. Do not be afraid, the angel said, he has been raised. The women were still filled with terror but something else crept in—great joy. They ran to tell the disciples and met the risen Lord on the way.

The Easter story is one of interwoven fear and joy—the same is true in our lives. We don't have to live on a fault line to feel the ground move beneath our feet. We have all felt the earth quake, so to speak. It's the phone call that begins with "sit down." It's the doctor with bad news from the PET scan. It's the realization that you can't fix the relationship. It's the realization that you can't fix your child. It's another month when the money runs out before the month does. We have all lived through some kind of earth-quaking experience. We have all felt fear.

Yet sometimes it is precisely in the shaking that we get a glimpse of great joy. Someone you love is holding your hand. A member of your church brings a hot meal. A Scripture verse brings a word of comfort. God's peace comes unexpectedly. Someone offers you forgiveness. Someone sits quietly beside you.

The women at the tomb didn't suddenly drop their fears when they learned that Jesus was alive. The women ran to tell the good news while they were full of fear and joy. The same may be true for us. They were afraid, but they went anyway. They didn't go alone—they had each other—and as they went, they found Jesus. I can think of worse metaphors for the life of a disciple.

Right after the quake of 2018, my children and I were together on the floor of my older son's room when the first big aftershock came, a 5.7. Aftershocks always come after a big quake, and you can't predict them. The aftershock was another big jolt, but this time it was different. We sat with our arms around each other and a few stuffed animals thrown in for good measure. We were afraid but thankful to be together.

"No storm can shake my inmost calm" read the words of the hymn "My Life Flows On in Endless Song" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 763). This is not entirely true when I'm relying on a calm I must manufacture. I can't manufacture it. But God can. Our inner calm is God's own peace, given by the Spirit.

What I know from Christ's death and resurrection is that God doesn't promise a life of steady ground. God promises God's presence in the shaking and the joy of God's loving embrace.

God says to us what Jesus said to those fearful and joyful women at the tomb: you will see me. It's a solid foundation on which to rest. †

To discuss this article and the Easter story, download a study guide by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab at livinglutheran.org.