

In Matthew's mind as he composed his Jesus story - beginnings, teaching, displays of God's power, death and resurrection, he wanted to keep a close connection between Jesus' death and his coming to life again.

Both Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection are earth-shaking events – let's hear him:

Matthew 27:51-53

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

Matthew 28:1-4

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

We do earthquakes here regularly in our part of the world and they've been shattering in more ways than one -

I think for people who've experienced earthquakes at the Christchurch and Kaikoura level they're life-changing experiences – in some respects they represent the end of one world and the beginning of another. Just as I knew what I was doing when JFK died and my kids know what they were doing when Lady Diana was killed, so the earthquakes of recent years have been that significant. After the second Christchurch quake we listened to a number of locals tell their stories – each highly individual.

If you go back in Matthew to chapter 24 and read about the end of the temple, about earthquakes, about famine, about death and heavenly darkness – so much of that applies in the first instance to the events of the first Easter.

Jesus' death was the end of the old world; Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the new world. As the Messiah, Jesus entered willingly (that is eventually, after having it out with God in Gethsemane) into the cataclysm of suffering and death that characterized his cross, which marked the end-of-the-age.

As he is raised amid signs and wonders, we witness the beginning of fresh, divinely given intervention that changed the course of history.

To illustrate from the natural world: a group stood on the edge of a beautiful mountain lake, a scene of perfect serenity—the blue lake reflecting the high peaks in the background. 'This tranquil place was created in a violent cataclysm aeons ago,' explained the guide. 'At some point there was an earthquake so big that the landscape of this region was changed forever. A mountain was brought low, the river changed course, and we have this wonderful lake.'

Well, something very much like that happened at the first Easter. The resurrection isn't just about Jesus' once dead body coming to life. Easter is a cataclysm, an earthquake that shook our world, turned things upside down, and altered our reality forever.

The women come to Jesus's tomb in the darkness of Easter morning.

'Where were the men?' you ask. From what we've seen of their behaviour this past week, as they deserted Jesus and fled when the soldiers came to arrest him, we can expect that the fearful disciples were hunkered down somewhere in Jerusalem, terrified that what had been done to Jesus would be done to them. Or maybe they were simply paralyzed. A father said after his much loved daughter had died, 'It's an unbelievable effort just to get out of bed in the morning, to summon the courage to put one foot in front of the other,' Death freezes us, takes over everything.

So perhaps it was the women—who came out to the cemetery with flowers to dress the grave of dead Jesus—who were the realistic facers of facts among Jesus's disciples.

'It was a great journey while it lasted,' one of them might have said. 'Now it's over. Jesus is gone.' And they came out to the tomb while it was still dark, which must have been an apt description for their state of mind—dark.

Then the earth heaved. There was an earthquake. An angel descended straight out of heaven and perched impudently upon the stone that once blocked the entrance to the tomb—the stone that the earthquake had now rolled away.

The once all-powerful soldiers who had been sent to guard the tomb shook like frightened rabbits and fell to the ground as if in a stupor.

Matthew 28:5-7

The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Now I have told you.'

Hear the bells ringing: Second Chapter of Acts

The angel spoke to the women (not to the soldiers, interestingly) and preached, 'I know you are looking for dead Jesus. He isn't here. He is raised; come see for yourselves. Then go quickly and tell those frightened male disciples!'

Matthew 28:8-10

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

And the women ran not just back into Galilee, as they were told, but into a whole new world. In the unfolding story of the church, in the remaining pages of the New Testament, you can almost feel Jesus's followers reviewing their assessment of reality, rethinking their definitions of just what can and can't be done, engaging in risky assignments they would have never attempted if they had been left to their own devices.

What had happened? ***Their world had been rocked.***

When dead Jesus broke loose from the grip of death, when the crucified one became the resurrected one, when the earth shook and the stone was rolled away, it was like the first day in a whole new world. Eventually they came to see that the resurrection of Jesus had changed everything. Now they knew for sure the truth about God: God is the one who raised crucified Jesus from the dead.

Theologians have said that if you don't believe the resurrection happened, if you don't believe it's real, then you've got to come up with some other explanation for the birth of the church. How do you explain why these once totally disheartened disciples were transformed from completely defeated cowards into joyful preachers of the good news that God had defeated death, overcome evil, and triumphed as resurrected Jesus?

Something happened; something big that shook not only Judea but the whole Roman Empire. It wasn't a change of heart that propelled them. It wasn't that they came to a new understanding about God. It was that ***their whole world had been shaken***. Now they had to rush into every corner of the world and speak the truth or else appear stupidly out of step with reality.

Be careful! When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death— or say, you come to a seemingly dead end, or you feel hopeless or you feel like giving up remember that Easter shakes us up, wakes us up into a new definition of what's what.

We're made to question the 'facts' we've been told. What if Caesar and who represents him today aren't in charge? What if things aren't over until God says they're over? Who gets to say things are hopeless and it's time to sink into despair?

Easter isn't just a dead man come back to life; ***it's a whole new world***.