

While You Were Sleeping
Matthew 28:1-15
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Preached on April 20, 2014 at San José, Costa Rica

In the middle of the night, or maybe it was in broad daylight, nobody knows for sure, a tomb went from filled to empty. Sometime between Friday evening and Sunday dawn, God did something as amazing and unobserved as the very creation of the world itself. Matthew tells us there were security guards posted at the tomb, guards that were still there even when the two Marys arrived to pay their respects on Sunday morning. But they didn't see anything. And so, somehow, into the darkness of that sealed, guarded, sacred tomb, flowed spirit and light and life, the very spirit and light and life that God used to bring all of this world into being the first time, and then in that secret moment, whenever it was, into the fullness of being. A creation. A resurrection. A Christ present for both occasions.

If it's true that the guards didn't see or hear a thing that would tip them off that something was happening, we have to conclude that the resurrection was a silent affair, like the wind, like our breath, like the murmurings of our hearts. There is that earthquake Matthew records, but you see the earthquake doesn't happen at the moment of the resurrection, but when the angel arrives to roll back the stone that sealed the tomb. The resurrection is a fact by that time, so the earthquake is really just a trumpet's blast, announcing God's glorious deed, a loud exclamation point on the word of life God spoke in silence. I'm struck by that contrast between the silence of the resurrection and the sound of the earthquake, the imperceptible

movement of heaven and the violent shaking of the earth. We might imagine it would be the reverse, that an explosive sound would accompany an explosive deed, with the silence of reverent awe following. But no, the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place more like the way our lives in Christ unfold, a silent, imperceptible movement of heaven followed by the shaking of our foundations as we realize just what has happened to us.

No, the guards didn't see or hear a thing. Maybe it happened while they were eating lunch. Maybe it happened while they were drinking. Maybe it happened while they were sleeping. So much happens while we're sleeping, doesn't it? Crocuses and daffodils, those flowers in the northern climes that signal spring is here, break through after their long winter's sleep while we are sleeping and we find their beauty suddenly, unexpectedly, in the morning. Dreams stir the imagination, and plant seeds for action, while we are sleeping. Parents are praying, while children are sleeping. The stars move in their courses, while we are sleeping. On the other side of the world, children are born, and their elders pass away, all while we are sleeping. So much happens beyond our ability to perceive it, whether we are literally asleep or just sleepwalking through life. And God is in the midst of it all.

Maybe you remember that romantic comedy from a few years ago that starred Sandra Bullock, called "While You Were Sleeping." It's about a single woman who would fantasize about a relationship with a certain man who passed by

her workplace everyday. Well, one day, she has the chance to actually meet him when she saves his life following an accident. When she accompanies him to the hospital to check on him, the man's family assumes she is his girlfriend whom they've never met. Of course, the man himself is in no position to confirm or deny this fact since he is in a coma, and she can't bring herself to disappoint the family who thinks that she needs to be by their loved one's side. And so the farce begins. Of course, what happens is that she ends up falling in love not only with the injured man's brother, but in fact with his whole crazy family too. And all of this has taken place, the man learns when he wakes up, "while you were sleeping."

It's a cute premise for a movie, but it's also true in our lives, that amazing changes take place while we are busy doing other things like studying or working or even brushing our teeth. I didn't plan to become a pastor when I started college, but as I made my way through school, the opportunities that appeared before me had less to do with my formal studies, and more to do with leading me, and others, to recognize in myself things I hadn't seen before. Looking back, I see how I really ended up majoring in Habitat for Humanity rather than the Communications that appears on my official transcript, but it didn't really occur to me until after it was all over. Silently, I was being prepared for communicating in a completely different way than I had imagined, but only when the earthquake struck, did I realize what had been happening to me. That earthquake was the response to a letter I had written about a matter of interest to the campus ministry community.

Someone I admired wrote back complimenting me on my ability to share the difficult news I had shared in my letter. And as I read what he had written to me, I realized that God had been preparing me for something that I was not preparing for myself. While I did pretty well in my filmmaking classes, I did even better in becoming myself, and who God wanted me to be. And I knew then that I would probably never win that Oscar for Best Director I had always dreamed about.

In the Bible, sleep is a metaphor for death. We have to be careful how we use that metaphor, especially around children, but I think it can be a useful one. You see, when we talk about resurrection, we can also talk about waking up from our sleeping, coming back to life, or coming into new life. Christ's resurrection wakes us up. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us" but he could also have written, that "while we were yet sleeping, Christ died for us." Yes, we were asleep in our sin, dead in our sin, and yet the spirit and light and life of God was in that tomb of ours bringing us to life once again, unbeknownst to us, to those guarding us in our sin, perhaps even to those who were hoping and praying that we would wake up and join the living, the truly living. While we were sleeping, God was doing amazing things!

Maybe you remember that old story of a shoemaker and his wife, who had become quite poor through no fault of their own. They were down to their last meal and their last bit of leather. Before bed, the shoemaker carefully cut the

leather so that he might sew it the next morning and try to make a sale. They went to bed committing their cares to God and looking forward to the next day. When they awoke, the shoemaker went into his shop surprised to find the leather gone, but a beautifully made pair of shoes in its place. Perplexed but thankful, he placed them in the window of his shop and hoped for the best. Well, along came a rich man who was so enamored of the shoes that he bought them on the spot, and even paid extra because they were of such fine quality. The purchase was enough for the shoemaker to buy two shoes' worth of leather, and so he did, and went to bed once again, leaving his work ready for the next day. Of course, the same thing happened while he was sleeping, and he found two fine pairs of shoes on his workbench, the sale of which allowed him to buy four shoes' worth of leather, and so it went for many days.

Near Christmas, curiosity and gratitude got the best of the couple and they wanted to find out who was helping them, and so they stayed up late one night hiding in a closet and learned that it was a pair of elves who came silently in the night, did their fine work, and left before dawn. And they decided that as a gift of gratitude, they would make a set of fine clothes and shoes for the elves, which they did, and hid themselves to see what would happen. Well, the elves came as usual, and seeing the clothes, dressed themselves as fast as they could, and began to dance and sing, "Now, we are boys so fine to see. Why should we any longer

cobblers be?” And they danced away out the door and never returned, leaving the shoemaker and his wife back on their feet for the rest of their lives.

And so it is with us, perhaps, that while we are sleeping God’s favor finds us unexpectedly, undeservedly. And then one day we discover the nature of our mischief-making God who has put us on our feet and opened up our future for us. It’s the grace that found its way silently into Jesus’ tomb and raised him from the dead. It’s the grace that finds its way into our sleepy hearts and minds and wakes us up. It’s the grace that slips past every stone and every security guard to transform our lives while we are sleeping, that we may awake to find a new day full of hope and justice, and love. It’s the grace that Helen Keller described when she said, “The most beautiful things of the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

This Easter, may you feel with your heart the earthquake that reveals the new life that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has brought into your life, while you were sleeping. Amen.