When I was a young man, I learned to play the organ. My great passion was to learn the organ works of J.S. Bach. I was surprised when I came to the organ pieces Bach wrote for the Easter season. I expected these pieces to be light and joyful. I expected them to be written in major keys. I was surprised to discover Bach’s organ music for Easter does not sound light and joyful. Bach’s Easter music is serious and highly dramatic in character. Much of it was not written in major keys. I’ve asked our organist, Jim Potts, to play the first two phrases of one of Bach’s Easter chorale preludes for you right now, so you will understand what I mean.

Bach understood something about Easter that I did not understand as a young man. The Easter event contains joy for us, but Easter is complex and serious. Though we would be glad for Easter to be easy and comfortable, Easter is not light, Easter is not easy.

We cannot fully understand or describe what happened during those three days when Christ was crucified, died, buried and then rose from the grave. We get ourselves into trouble when we attempt to say the exact meaning. There is one thing we can understand about Easter, which is conveyed in Bach’s heavy, angular music in minor keys. The Easter event was and is a serious, earth shaking, life changing event for us.

This is what we see in the Easter story in Matthew’s Gospel. After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. What follows is a face to face encounter with the risen Christ. The women left the tomb with joy, but they were also filled with fear. They were overwhelmed by their experience. They were shaken to the core. They did not know what was happening. They did not know what would happen next.

Their lives would never be the same again. From this time on Mary and Mary and the other disciples would see glimpses of the risen Christ, but Easter did not restore their previous way of life. Their relationship with Jesus had been close and physical. Now everything had changed.

In the Gospel of Matthew the eleven disciples see and hear the voice of the risen Christ only once, as he commissions them and authorizes them to baptize followers in his name. Their old friend and teacher was in some way gone forever, even though he appeared to them in human form. At Easter the disciples experienced first hand a revelation of God’s power. They experienced a great in breaking of God’s love in their lives. They also lost something they dearly loved.

After just a few weeks, Jesus was gone, and the disciples were on their own once again. Their situation changed quickly. They had to leave behind their old lives; they had to leave behind their old lives as mere disciples of Jesus. The disciples were forced to become the apostles. There was no going back. They became the preachers and the leaders of the Jesus movement. Easter was a time of joy. It was also the time when life changed forever for them.

Easter is not about life returning to normal. Easter is about the resurrecting power of God’s love in our lives, even through the earth shaking changes of our lives.

Most of you know about the time when everything changed for me. It was the day, almost three years ago, when my first wife, Nancy Bronder, was fatally injured in a bicycling accident. As it was for the characters in the Gospel story, the event was like an earthquake. I will never forget the moment I felt the earth move under my feet. It was at the moment I first walked into her room in the intensive
care unit and saw her lying in the bed, hooked up to all of those machines. I fell to the ground sobbing, as if the earth were shaking under my feet. And it was true, my life would never be the same again.

This was not an Easter event. There was no resurrection of her body, which lay unmoving, kept alive by a ventilator and other machines. But, as Easter was for Jesus’ disciples, for me the time surrounding Nancy’s death was a time when I began to understand more. I began to understand more about life and death. I began to understand more about the meaning of love. I began to understand and know more of the resurrecting power of God’s love.

In this way, my earth shaking event was like Easter. That is because Easter is about the resurrecting power of God’s love in our lives, precisely through the earth shaking changes of our lives.

We are enduring one of the most challenging, earth-shaking events of our lives. As the weeks go past, we are beginning to understand that the epidemic ravaging the world will not be over in three weeks or six weeks. As the weeks go past we realize the effect of the epidemic is much more like a world wide earthquake. Many of us, many nations all over the world, are being shaken to the core.

Like the disciples next to the empty tomb, we are confused and afraid. Even when we don’t feel confused, we are often confused. Should we wear masks or not? First they said no, now they say yes. We are confused, even when we don’t think we are confused.

Like the disciples next to the empty tomb we are confused and afraid. Even when we don’t feel especially afraid, our bodies are full of fear and tension. Every day this week I have been exhausted by 8 p.m. I get ready for bed early. Then I lie in bed, unable to sleep. As I lie in bed I feel the tension vibrating through my body. We are afraid, even when we don’t think we are afraid. We are confused and afraid and anxious. It is a most difficult time.

We are like the disciples at the first Easter. Don’t think it was easy for them. It wasn’t. There was fear and confusion, there were fighting and arguments about what was right to do. The disciples argued with each other, they argued with their parents and husbands and wives. They tried to make sense of what was happening as the ground shifted under their feet. I hope there was joy for them in the days but I know there was overwhelming fear and confusion as they felt the ground moving under their feet.

Today we feel the ground moving under our feet and our hearts are filled with confusion and fear. Now is the time for us to hold fast to the first power given to us by God, which is love. Now is the time for us to open our eyes to see a new revelation of God’s power and goodness in the world around us. Now is the time for us to be changed by what we have seen. Now is the time for us to begin to understand more, more about life, more about love, more about why we are here. Now is the time for us to lay aside those things that have been keeping us from the work of love.

Easter is about the resurrecting power of God’s love in our lives, precisely through the earth shaking changes of our lives. So let this earth shaking time be an Easter event for you. Let your life never be the same as it was. Let go of the part that is dead or that is death for you.

Like the disciples at the first Easter, we are confused and afraid, and rightly so. No matter your fear, no matter the confusion of your life, amid the shaking of the ground make a space for a new revelation of God’s love. Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Alleluia!