

India is more densely populated than El Salvador. The earthquakes that recently struck these two countries measured about the same magnitude, but the loss of life has been much higher in the Asian quake. I visited southern India about a year and a half ago for a meeting of Societas Liturgica. On the way home I changed planes in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, close to the epicenter of last week's quake. I had an eleven hour layover there. A priest from Chicago and a Swiss employee with the World Council of Churches had the same layover, so we took a cab from the airport to the bay to sightsee. And shop. We told the driver to drop us off at the Hotel Taj Mahal. He started out, and then we asked, "How long will this ride take?" He said about one and three quarter hours. That just didn't sound right. I said, "Do you understand that we want to go to the Hotel Taj Mahal, and not to the Taj Mahal?" which is in another part of India. He said, "Yes, of course." So I asked my friends in the cab, did anyone know how many people live in Mumbai? I knew Kansas City had half a million people, but over a million in the metro area. Rome has a population of 3 million. Did anyone know if Mumbai had that many people? Nobody knew. So I checked the guide book. Fifteen million people live in Mumbai. So, with an earthquake, the possibility for loss of life is enormous.

It's been touching the last few days to hear stories of people rescued from concrete tombs. Workers who had nearly given up on survivors found more. The miraculous appearance of these people gave joy to a world grieving the tragedy. People just don't come up out of a grave.

That's why the birth of Christianity was such an earthshaking event. The whole religion is based on our belief that Jesus came up out of grave. At the end of the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes about resurrection. Some readers had been troubled by this belief, so Paul rolls up his sleeves and starts them off with something very basic. Four points, he says: Jesus died. Jesus was buried. He rose from the dead. And people saw him risen. Paul repeats these statements in much the same way that he heard them. They probably formed one of our first creeds. Paul stresses that the events fulfilled the Scriptures; the prophets foresaw all this. He says the resurrection happened on the third day of the burial; he didn't want any doubt that Jesus had actually died. Then he lists the appearances of the risen Jesus: first to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to 500 at once -- some of whom were still alive, Paul says, so you could ask them about it. Then Jesus appeared to James, and then to Paul. Even the gospels don't relate all these appearances. Paul calls himself the least of those to whom Jesus appeared; he is like one born abnormally. The translator is being kind by using that English expression. In his original Greek, Paul doesn't call himself "one born abnormally." He calls himself an abortion. He is the least wanted of human beings, and yet Jesus appeared to him.

The tragedies in India and El Salvador would be hopeless if it were not for the Christian faith in resurrection. Sadness and terror affect our families, our friends and complete strangers. But whenever despair threatens us, we can repeat the core of Paul's message: Jesus died. Jesus

was buried. Jesus rose. Jesus appeared. The resurrection is real. Nothing can harm us.