



“ROLL THE STONE AWAY”

Easter Sunday – Mark 16:1-8



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CCUMC & BCUMC

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“And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

And that is how the earliest of the four gospels ends. Scribes added two other endings later – a short one and a long one. After all, how could they possibly leave the Gospel with an unfinished ending like that? -- “...they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”

Well, somebody must’ve said something to someone, because if they hadn’t there’d be no Book of Mark, there’d be no Christian church, and no Easter for the last two thousand years. But imagine, if you had been there – standing in an empty tomb, spices in hand, ready to do whatever it is one does to a dead body in the first century – if you had been one of those women, don’t you think you might’ve bolted in terror and amazement, afraid to tell anyone what you saw?

These women had gotten up early and gone to the tomb, ready to care for their friend’s body. They simply wanted to be of service – to apply oils and salves to the wounds that resulted from Friday’s violence. They had gone to the tomb thinking that even if their leader and friend had died unjustly, at least he had died for a good cause. He was a good man, a great preacher, a charismatic leader, and like so many of his kind who give hope to the poor and despairing, he had been killed by those in power.

He was a good man, and now he was dead. But they wanted to honor him. They wanted to do the right thing, to pay homage to him by giving him some dignity in death. The question on their lips that morning wasn’t anything profound, or theological, or philosophical. It wasn’t about the meaning of Jesus’ life – or his death – or even what they should do to continue the mission. The question on their lips that morning was a practical one. “Who will roll away the stone for us?” They just wanted to anoint the body, but the stone at the tomb was big – really big.

Who will roll away the stone for us?

Maybe that's our question this Easter, as well. Haven't we come to pay homage to a great teacher? -- a charismatic leader? -- a good man? We've come to honor Jesus, but we have questions on our lips too.

Who will roll away the stone for us?

Who will roll away the stone of sorrow from the dark tomb of our losses?

Who will roll away the stone of bitterness from the dark tomb of our failures?

Who will roll away the stone of cynicism from the dark tomb of our jaded vision of the world?

Who will roll away the stone of indifference from the dark tomb of the world's suffering?

Who will roll away the stone of grief from the dark tomb of our broken hearts, or our broken relationships?

When we arrived at church this morning we were still part of a Good Friday world. A world where terrorists feel no regret for huge loss of life, and military leaders argue strategy while our sons' and daughters' lives are on the line and children are dying at alarming rates in Syria and Palestine and Nigeria and Kenya and the Ukraine and countless other places they rarely even mention on the news. A 'Good Friday world' where we know full well the heartache of death, the agony of failure, the misery of broken spirits, and the shame of our own worst inclinations.

Maybe we've lost jobs – or loved ones; maybe we've hurt a dear friend – or been hurt ourselves; maybe we've become cynical about the future or joyless in the present.

How can we open the dark tombs of our lives that hold all our sorrow and anxiety and brokenness and loss? How can we open the dark tombs of the world that hold humanity's lowest moments and worst cruelties? Who among us

doesn't know exactly how heavy that stone is, that seals in the pain and sorrow of our lives?

So, like the women on that morning long ago, we too come this morning with that question on our lips, "Who will roll away the stone for us?"

But wait – if we come asking, "Who will roll the stone away..." doesn't that mean that we also come with a glimmer of hope? I mean, underneath that question there's a desire to trust. A yearning to trust that there's some kind of "Easter power" that can roll away even the biggest stone, empty the darkest tomb, and let the light in.

"When the women looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back."

Brothers and sisters, this is the Good News of the Gospel – and you can take it to the bank, as they say: God can roll away the stones that have sealed up our world and our souls in sin and grief and loss.

The tomb is empty! Love is stronger than death! Forgiveness is deeper than sin (albeit more difficult!). Evil does not have the last word! Christ is risen, and we are invited into the astounding mystery of the Spirit of God -- Hallelujah!

When the women arrived at the tomb, the stone was already gone. They didn't have to do anything but show up. God had already done the work of rolling back that stone. God had already made a way where there was no way.

So -- Are you ready? Are you ready to show up? Ready to testify to God's power to roll away the stones that guard the hurts and sorrows of our lives?

I don't know – Maybe we really are like the women, and we're just here today to pay homage to a dead man. A good man, but a dead one – one long gone. We can keep honoring him, worshiping his name and trying to live as he taught. We can ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" and teach our children all

the cool stories about his awesome love. We can serve him well, this dead man, just as those three women came to serve him one last time on that first Easter morn...

But isn't there more to it? Aren't we asked to do more than give honor to a great teacher? Aren't we challenged to do more than pass on the ethic of love and justice that he showed us? It's a great start, but what if we're called to believe that, in Christ, God turned the world upside-down? ... that through Jesus, God has given us the power to overcome every kind of death we know, in this world and the next?

What Easter asks us to accept is that Christ didn't leave this world, but continues to be present, through a death-defying power that can overcome every kind of tomb (and sealing stone) that we ever encounter in our lives. The resurrection of Jesus from the grave on Easter defies human logic (such as it is). It offends our intelligence. It makes no sense. And I don't know about you – your faith might be more pure than mine; maybe your faith doesn't get all hung up on details – but sometimes, even I find this resurrection thing kind of hard to swallow.

But – maybe that's the idea. God is not anti- intellectual. Otherwise we wouldn't have been given these big beautiful brains! We wouldn't have been commanded to love God with all our heart, our strength, and our mind. In fact, if left to our own devices I'm pretty sure, if we had enough information and time, we could solve just about any problem that comes our way. But signs of intelligence are everywhere – from space ships to computer chips – but there aren't many signs that we've ever figured out how to really live in this world. Our big brains haven't saved us yet.

20th century poet W.H. Auden wrote about revolutionary change; a "change of heart", a transformation of a society from a closed-off psychology of fear to an

open psychology of love. Sounds almost Christian, huh? Anyway -- Auden wrote, "Nothing possible can save us."

Nothing possible can save us. If there were some reasonable, logical way to heal our broken hearts we would have thought of it. Our big brains would have restored our fractured world by now. But it wasn't possible. It took something impossible to do that. An incredible, impossible event that broke – no, breaks into our daily lives, turning our best attempts at self-sovereignty upside-down.

Nothing possible can save us.

Nothing possible can roll the stone away.

Nothing possible can bring light into the darkness -- life into death.

So God did something impossible: "He has been raised. He is not here." That's the impossible message the women heard when they dared to look beyond the rolled back stone. – "He's not here." Say what?

They looked into the tomb and a young man – presumably an angel – was sitting where Jesus' dead body should've been, and he gave them the impossible message. I imagine the angel could see the confusion on the women's faces: "So Where is he?!?"

"He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him."

And this is the key to this Easter morning's surprise promise. The women did not hear that Jesus was raised to sit at the right hand of God the Father almighty on some ethereal throne on some far away cloud in some far away heaven. This was far more radical. "He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him."

Galilee? Let's think about this. Just where IS Galilee? Galilee is where these disciples came from. It was home – the place where their families lived, where their jobs were, where they had boring ordinary routines. It wasn't Jerusalem –

the Holy City, the center of Power – but Galilee, backwater, Podunk place of everyday life.

Go back to your ordinary lives. Go back to where your jobs are – where your families are. That's where Jesus will meet you. That's where you'll find him and be empowered by him. Go back to your Galilee and continue the story. This is not the end. God's business isn't finished. This is only the beginning. This is where your work begins – where your life begins.

This is the message of Easter. Don't stand at the tomb paying homage to some dead teacher. Don't set your sights on simply putting ointment on wounds already inflicted. Go back to the place where you live your life and meet the living savior there. He's waiting for you.

Go to meet the God who chooses to walk among us with a power greater than all the devastating powers – the corrupting powers that lead us to despair. Go to meet the Christ who cannot be stopped by the world's intolerance or fear or violence or greed. Go to Galilee. Go home, to the place where God has planted you and find Christ there, rising above the wreckage of human injustice day after day.

Christ is alive – and friends, that means that we can live too. We don't have to just exist in a dog eat dog world. We don't have to just 'get by' anymore. We can live! Because when we have the courage to go to our Galilee and meet the living Lord, then we are given the power to live a life that won't be stopped by boredom or lack of meaning or loneliness or hatred or injustice or disease or poverty or addiction or anything else in all creation.

We can enter the reality of the empty tomb. A reality that overturns the fears of the world; a truth that overrides everything that goes against the love of God.

The Easter promise is that God's business wasn't finished in that tomb all those years ago. The Easter promise is that the same Jesus who couldn't be stopped by torture, death, or giant stones rolled in front of tombs... This is the same Jesus who is still alive today -- here and available to live in you, to rescue you, heal you, and empower you; to set you free from any tomb you ever known.

Who will roll away the stone for us?

It's already done! God rolled the stone away, and Jesus is alive, and He's waiting for us.

Alleluia! And amen.