

Who Will Roll Away the Stone?

Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16: 1-8

March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

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Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Mark 16: 1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

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Fear. Grief. Sadness. Confusion. Bewilderment. Hardly words we associate with the incredible joy and triumph of Easter. Yet for Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome, the resurrection of Jesus which we know of is still ahead of them, still unknown, so joy is still far away.

As the day dawns, they have come to anoint the body of their beloved teacher; to say good-bye with one last act of love, gratitude and care. They have come alone, as Peter and the other disciples are in hiding, fearful of being arrested as followers of Jesus, fearful for their own lives.

The women are prepared for their task, except for the looming question of who will roll away the stone for them. Just three days before they had seen the one ton stone rolled in place by some men,¹ and they know that they cannot move it on their own. They have the courage to come out from hiding to care for Jesus' body, but they do not have the physical strength to roll away the stone. Yet they are going any way—in faith, in hope, in optimism, perhaps even in wishful thinking.

The women arrive at the tomb, and strangely, miraculously, the stone has indeed been rolled away. And inside the tomb is a messenger who simply says that Jesus is not here, he has

been raised. No triumphant fanfare, no glory of the Lord shining with the words of the good news of great joy, no multitude of the angelic heavenly host,ⁱⁱ that had announced his birth. Just a simple quiet reminder to tell the disciples to go and meet Jesus in Galilee, the same instruction he had spoken when they had gathered for the Passover feast in the upper roomⁱⁱⁱ.

The faithful courage that led the women to the tomb is lost, and in terror and amazement they run away and say nothing to anyone.

That is the end of Mark's Gospel, but not the end of the story.

We do not have the great earthquake, the trembling guards and the greeting of Jesus as in Matthew's gospel^{iv}. We do not have the women's report of Jesus' resurrection being judged an idle tale as in Luke's gospel^v. We do not have Jesus being mistaken for the gardener as in John's gospel^{vi}.

But in Mark, we have quite a bit of attention to the stone that had been rolled across, and rolled away from, Jesus' tomb. The stone was placed to have the final say to the crucifixion. When we were to think that death had won and hope was lost, God kept being God, kept working redemption, kept on with the battle against evil and conquered the grave without fanfare, without pomp or circumstance. Then Jesus didn't wait around for us to come to him, he went on with his own promises and told us to follow him there.^{vii}

While Mark leaves us with an untold story, we do know the story was told and is still being told.

Yes, the women were afraid, and for good reason. Who would believe them? A rolled away one ton stone, a missing dead Jesus and an unknown young man with a message. Yes, the disciples were hidden and locked away in a room as they were afraid for their own lives. And those fears became another stone that needed to be rolled away so that the women did tell the disciples. And Jesus did appear to those disciples, just as he promised. And he forgave Peter for denying him. And he promised to send the Holy Spirit to them. And he helped them understand what had just happened, and how it fulfilled the promise of Scripture. And in time Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit came. And every last stone in the lives of those disciples was rolled away. Because there is no stone too large for God. No obstacle that God cannot remove. Jesus has swallowed up the sting of death forever.

The Easter story is still being told. We have our reminder that the stone being rolled away tells us that Easter is also about the ways in which God removes obstacles in our own lives, those obstacles that try to keep us from God, and try to stop us from living the life that God has called us to live. Sometimes we need to leave our own tombs, our own places that hold us back from the world, our own places that shut us off from living fully. We need to step out in faith; and we need to trust that God will be there for us, and help us in our need. The women know they cannot roll that stone away, but that is not stopping them from going to the tomb. Easter means that God will be with us, always, and especially when we need God to be.^{viii}

Let us be glad and rejoice. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Jason Dulle, <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2011/03/24/the-size-of-the-stone-covering-jesus>

ⁱⁱ Lk 2: 9,13

ⁱⁱⁱ Mk 14: 28

^{iv} Mt 28: 1-9

^v Lk 24: 10-11

^{vi} Jn 20: 14-17

^{vii} Chelsey Harmon, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-03-25/mark-161-8-4/>

viii / Rev. James Laurence, First Lutheran Church of Albemarle (NC)-

<https://mypastoralponderings.com/2021/04/04/rolling-the-stone-away-my-sermon-on-easter-sunday/> Rev. James Laurence, First Lutheran Church of Albemarle (NC).