

“The Rolling Stone”

Mark 16:1-8

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

This is the most unusual Easter worship service that I've ever experienced. As much as I love our home, this is not where I want to be today. I want to be with you, Calvary, and with the rest of the Christian world around the globe - gathering together to proclaim in unison, *“Christ is Risen!”*

I want to celebrate the Risen Christ with “my people”... because you are the ones who teach me WHO the Risen Christ is and what he looks like in the world.

It's the stories behind your faces on Easter morning that tell me everything I need to know about Resurrection Hope. That through the grief of your losses, through the trials of your cancer treatments, through the pain of your broken relationships, through your job losses and through the disappointments of life not turning out as you planned, through the lament of ongoing

injustices and inequities...through *all* of that... we stand together and say, *“Christ is Risen!”* The power in our collective Easter proclamation is what has always made Easter feel like *Easter* to me.

As the 19th century clergyman Phillips Brooks said, *“Let [us] say not merely, 'Christ is risen,' but 'I shall rise.'”* We shall rise.

This is what I feel on Easter when we gather in the sanctuary with the light streaming through the windows and the lilies brightening the chancel, as we process down the aisle with the Christ Candle, as we sing the Hallelujah Chorus...I feel the Spirit of God rising up in us together.

But here we are. Separated. Not in our sanctuary. Not surrounded by lilies, not greeting one another. We are worshipping in our own homes, from our living rooms...with

just ourselves...or maybe one or two others. Perhaps we wonder, today, what it means for us to be a people who proclaim, "*Christ is Risen!*" if we don't have a chorus of fellow Christians within earshot to echo back to us, "*He is Risen indeed!*"

What does Easter mean for us today, this year? It is a much quieter day, isn't it? A much more unsure and uncertain day.

Well, as we seek to proclaim Resurrection Hope in the midst of a global pandemic that marches forward full force, as each day brings mounting statistics of death and disease, we're reminded by Mark's gospel, that on that first Easter morning, the air was thick with death, and hearts were heavy with dis-ease.

If we have to experience Easter morning in the middle of a pandemic, then Mark's gospel is where we want to be. Mark meets us where we are. Or maybe, Mark reminds us that where we *usually* are on Easter morning - gathered in celebration in our adorned sanctuaries - is nothing like

where the women at the tomb were.

Maybe, this year, we can actually meet the women where *they* are...and see the empty tomb from their point of view.

Maybe this Easter will teach us something about the mystery of the Resurrection that we've never known before - that it was surprising, and confusing. It was not an immediate cause for celebration, rather, what it caused was a pause, a hesitation, a stepping back, before a moving forward.

Mark writes, "*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.*"

As they approach the tomb, they wonder aloud to each other, "*Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?*" (v4) You see Mark 15:47 tells us that Mary Magdalene was there when Joseph of Arimathea rolled the big heavy stone in front of the tomb in the first place, so she knew from her own two eyes the barrier that lay before them.

“Who will roll away the stone for us?” It’s a genuine, well-founded concern and worry. And yet, it’s not a strong enough fear to prevent them from going to the tomb at all. It’s not like they stay at home in bed that morning thinking, *“Well, might as well not even go to the tomb because that huge stone is there; what’s the use?”*

No, they aren’t so pessimistic that they hold this roadblock, this barrier, as an excuse to *not* make the journey to Jesus’ body...but they do voice aloud this unanswerable concern, *“Who will roll away the stone for us?”*

It’s like when you’re on a road trip and you come across some construction work and traffic is backed up and someone voices aloud some obvious question like, *“I wonder how long this construction is gonna last...how many miles long is it?”*

Of course, no one in your car knows how long it will take you to get through the construction and congested traffic...but you ask it out loud

anyway as a way of processing the situation before you. You keep moving forward, inching along in traffic, even as you continue to wonder, *“When will this clear up?, How late will this make us?”* etc...

Likewise, women wonder aloud, knowing good and well none of them can answer this question, *“Who will roll away the stone for us?”* But even as they ask it, just like the car inching forward in congested traffic, they keep going... they keep putting one foot in front of the other. They keep walking toward the tomb.

Their question, their worry, their initial fear, does not keep them from going to find Jesus. Their question is a real concern and roadblock in their minds, a real barrier they will have to face once they get there, but it doesn’t keep them from getting up and going nonetheless.

I wonder, how many of us would have the faith that these women did, to get up and go to Jesus’ tomb that morning, even if we knew that a huge stone would be blocking us? Of course, hindsight is 20/20...we know now that their fear would

be unfounded...but they had no way of knowing that at the time.

How many times do we limit what is possible because of the huge, insurmountable stone we THINK is in our way? How many times do we let perceived barriers (no matter how well-founded our fears or knowledge about those barriers are), how many times do we let perceived barriers keep us from getting up and moving forward?

How many times do we let our doubts/questions/fears/angers/vulnerabilities about what might block us from Jesus keep us from actually trying to move toward Jesus at all?

You see, in Mark's Gospel, I think the first act of Easter faith is that these three women get up, and move toward Jesus, even though they thought that something huge would be blocking them...something beyond what they could move on their own.

Remember in Jesus' day, tombs were almost more like caves hewn in the side of mountains, and so we're not talking about a small boulder here, we're

talking about a huge stone...a huge stone not easily rolled away.

These women know their own limitations, they know they are not strong enough to move it on their own and so they wonder in anxious fear together, *"Who will roll away the stone for us?"*

But here is where the mystery of Easter morning begins, my friends. Here is where we see the power of the Resurrection already at play. Because Mark tells us that when the women arrive at Jesus' tomb, and when *they look up*, *"they see that the stone - which was VERY large - had already been rolled back,"* (v4).

We can remain stuck, sometimes, in faith and in life, because we think we are stuck, when the truth is - the stone has been rolled away but we just haven't looked up long enough to see that it's gone.

Now, it's indeed a mystery as to how the stone has been removed. We're not told directly of course, who rolled away the stone...but we get the feeling that it was God, don't

we? God has rolled away the stone in front of the tomb and out of the place of death has come new life.

Of course, the women don't know about the new life just yet. They just know that the place of death they have come to is different than how they imagined or anticipated it to be. Their fear was not unfounded; they were not incorrect about there being a huge stone at Jesus' tomb. The stone was there. The barrier was there. Their worry was real.

But - their limited perspective was not the full picture. Where they saw their own limitations, they couldn't imagine God's ability to roll that stone away for them.

Who could have known? None of us. These women couldn't have known that God would roll away that stone from the tomb.

And again, I wonder, how many times, do we keep ourselves from moving forward in life, from taking a step out in faith, from believing that something that seems impossible might be possible,

because we are focused on the stone that is in our way, the stone that we think might be blocking us, when the reality is God has rolled that stone away. God has already opened up the place that we thought was closed. What we thought was sealed forever, and a done deal, God has undone and unsealed and set free.

So when we feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, God may not just magically whisk us out of that hard place, but God may move that rock to help shift our perspective so that we see things just a bit differently. God rolls away stones so that we don't stay stuck.

The stone has been rolled away. For Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome. And the stone has been rolled away for you and for me.

We don't have to know all the details of how it happened or why. We just have to look up and see that the stone has been rolled away. The mystery of the Risen Christ has never been about what we can intellectually understand or comprehend. It's about what we

can spiritually see...and how *that* sight moves us forward in faith. You see, the rolling stone allows us to just keep on rollin' in our lives.

Seeing that the stone has been rolled away; the women take the next step in faith. They step into the tomb. And they discover that the tomb is not what they thought it was either. It is not a grave... in fact, it is a gateway to the rest of their lives.

You see, when God rolls away stones in our lives, when God removes the things that we think are barriers...God doesn't leave us hanging. When barriers are brought down, when stones are rolled away, God meets us in those places with new messages.

And on that first Easter morning, Mark tells us that God meets these women - with an actual messenger. A man dressed in white. Who knows how long he had been sitting there. Maybe 5 minutes, maybe 5 hours. Maybe he just showed up when they walked through the tomb because that's when he was needed...but what's important is not how long the

Messenger had been waiting there...but that *he was there* waiting.

God is very comfortable with waiting. When God wants to get a message to us, I don't think there's a timeline where the clock is counting down and we're gonna miss the message if we don't act fast enough.

When the stone is rolled away, the message will be there for us, I believe, as it was for these women, whenever we look up - no matter how long it takes. The Messenger says, "*Don't 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 that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you,*" (v6-7).

"You were looking for what you expected to find, and that is not here. Instead, I'm pointing you toward what God wants you to find. What God wants you to find is not in a tomb, not in a grave; what God wants you to find is out in the world...in Galilee...out ahead of

you...going before
you...leading the way.”

“Do what you know to do;
follow God out of this grave
and back out into the world
where God has always been.
Look for Jesus in Galilee,
where he said he would be. His
place of ministry. His place of
transformation. That is where
he will meet you. Trust what
you’ve been told. Jesus is not
here in a tomb, he is out in the
world. He is not dead. He is
alive. He is not lying down, he
is raised up.”

It’s no wonder that Mark says
that “*terror and amazement
had seized them, they said
nothing to anyone for they were
afraid.*” (16:8) Hearing the
good news, even in a grave,
perhaps especially in a grave,
doesn’t mean we are all the
sudden ready to get up and go.

The sorrow and suffering of the
week before, and even the
mystery and grief and anxiety
and worry of the very moments
before as the women walked to
the tomb...those are not
magically erased just because
they are greeted by a heavenly
Messenger.

I don’t know about you, but
most messages from God take a
long time for me to discern and
understand. Even when I
discover a stone rolled away
where I thought a stone would
surely be stuck blocking my
way...even when that
happens...the way forward is
not always clear...and my
ability to take the next step is
not always immediately
accessible.

What I love about Mark’s
Easter account is that even as
Dawn breaks, the women still
walk in darkness for a while.
They don’t say anything to
anyone. They are afraid.

A rolled away stone, an empty
tomb, a heavenly messenger, a
word of where to go and what
to do...all of that is Good
News...and yet...and yet...the
women *hear* that Good
News...and aren’t quite ready
to immediately understand it or
act upon it. And that is okay.

Easter morning isn’t a one time
shot. It’s not a “take it or leave
it” proposition. It is the
opportunity of a lifetime, but it
doesn’t just come once. God is
always rolling away the
stone...always inviting us into

the grave to discover instead, a gateway to life.

And it's okay if we're slow to take it all in. Death doesn't disappear, just because Resurrection is a reality. In fact, it is the very reality of death that makes resurrection possible. Something has to die, in order for life to become new.

And with all death, there is grief and uncertainty. And that lingers. But we don't have to linger in those emotions alone.

The beauty of the good news in this text is that the women are told that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee. They know where to find him when *they* are ready. And we know that one day, they are ready, they do make it to Jesus in Galilee. One day they do proclaim his Resurrection far and wide, otherwise we wouldn't be here today still telling this story.

I think most of us can understand the emotions of these women. They go to the tomb looking for Jesus. And they are told they will not find

what *or who* they are looking for. Instead, they're given a message that calls them beyond the reality of the tomb into a future that they cannot yet see and yet they are called to move into that future by faith anyway.¹

Sound familiar?

For these women, the emotional reality of this morning remains confusing. Terror and amazement seize them. It is not a morning of celebration for them; it's a moment of curiosity. It's not a morning of public proclamation for them; it's a moment of private perspective-shifting. It's not a morning of hallelujahs; it's a moment of holy whispers.

It is *their* Easter morning, and maybe it is ours, this year, too.

What does it mean to celebrate Easter in the midst of a pandemic? It means that we're speaking into video cameras trusting that we are able to communicate with people *whom we cannot see* about a *Christ whom we cannot*

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 407: Resurrection," *I Love to Tell the Story* (5 April 2020), accessed on April 11,

2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1249.

see...even as we proclaim a message that we trust is pointing us beyond this moment into God's ultimate purpose...which is life. Life anew. Life as we've never known it before. Life that no longer caters to Death.

Instead of waking up to see what the death statistics are each day; maybe this Easter season we wake up to see what the signs of resurrection are all around us.

The way forward is not around death (not denying it or avoiding it), but it is through it. Mark reminds us this Easter that the way forward beyond *this* day, *this* moment, may not be something we can yet see ...but whatever the way forward is...Jesus is there. Already. Waiting. Jesus is in Galilee...his place of ministry and life...and he will meet us there...whenever we arrive.

In his book, *Theology of Hope*, theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that "[Hope] is not about *what's going to happen to us* as much as it is about *who* will be waiting for us."

As we move through this time of fear and worry and suffering and death and uncertainty...are we able to also move forward to find Jesus wherever he is waiting to meet us?

Will we take steps of faith to find Jesus? To search for his presence as the Risen Christ in the world around us?

While it feels like in this time that stone after stone is being rolled *into* our way - blocking our existence as we know it - and while it may feel like we live in a world of stagnant systems and stacking statistics, but it is also true that we live in a world of rolling stones.

The good news of Easter morning is that we do not have to live in a stagnant, stuck reality, because God is rolling away stones each and every morning...God rolled away a stone on that first Easter morning so that Jesus could get up and out and head to Galilee to make a way forward for the disciples...and God is rolling away stones in our life each and every day too.

Will we hunker down in fear because we think something is

blocking our way? Or will we join the women in Mark's gospel in making our way to what we think is a grave of death to perhaps discover that it's really a gateway to Life?

As the British rock band the Rolling Stones sang, *"You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, well...you just might find...You get what you need."*

The women at the tomb in Mark's gospel don't find what they want - someone to roll away the stone for them. They find what they need...the stone's already been rolled away. And they found what they needed...because they didn't hesitate to take steps of faith even in the midst of their fear and uncertainty.

If nothing else, in this time of pandemic, Easter morning reminds us that, *"No, we can't always get what we want, but God knows what we need."*

As we stand in a tomb looking for death, Jesus stands in a town experiencing New Life. From the grave all the way to Galilee...God keeps rolling

away stones...calling us forward...into New Life.

If you feel boxed in this morning, if you feel a little less Easter joy today, if you are experiencing the sorrow of grief and death - know you are not alone. You are in good company.

Maybe this year, we're experiencing the Resurrection as it was first experienced...as something that is so surprising that it stuns us into silence before it ever spurs us into celebration.

Maybe this year, we join the women in walking away from the tomb, a little more awe-struck. Wondering a bit more deeply about what this all means. Maybe instead of shouting Hope into the world, we allow Hope to gradually dawn on us...calling us to look up, out of our darkness, one stone's roll at a time.

Amen.