

Rolling Stones

Mark 16:1-8

April 16, 2006, Easter Sunday

The women who followed and loved Jesus had some unfinished business with him that Sunday morning. Events had progressed so quickly on Friday that they did not have time to properly anoint his body for burial before the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown. Joseph of Arimathea simply wrapped Jesus' body in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb cut out of the rock. The tomb was sealed by rolling a stone across the entrance.

Stones found at similar tombs were four to five feet in diameter and nine to ten inches thick. They were set in a slot that allowed them to roll open and closed, but it would have required several people to do so.

Walking to the tomb at dawn, the women were concerned about who would roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb. They knew they could not do so alone. They needed to get inside to anoint Jesus with burial spices. It was a somber walk, hearts aching with grief, bodies weary with shock, and heads bent in sorrow. Upon arrival, they lifted their eyes to see that the large stone that had caused their anxiety had already been rolled back. Someone had already been there before them. Someone had addressed their problem for them. Someone had already opened the door.

That which seemed impossible suddenly became possible.

Oftentimes we are not unlike the women going to the tomb that morning, focused on the obstacles in our way, consumed with anxiety about how to get into a tomb – a safe, dark, sealed-away catacomb – rather than worry about how to get out of such a lifeless, pallid existence back into life.

What boulders are weighing heavily upon your hearts, dragging you down with anxiety:

worry about how you are going to pass a test or make it through a class;

the burden of perfectionism, trying to be all things to all people, except yourself;

striving for success in order to earn recognition;

concern for a loved one who is struggling?

What stones are blocking your entrance to new beginnings:

fear of change with its dimensions of uncertainty and the unknown;

the stone of clinging to the past and its days of splendor;

grief for a loved one who has died?

Which rocks are hindering your forward movement:
the diagnosis of an illness or disability;
a broken relationship that once was so dear;
the inability to make a decision for fear of making the wrong one?

We have a tendency to blow our worries out of proportion, allowing them to consume our existence so that we can't see beyond them, we can't see around them, we can't see our way through them. We are not unlike the women walking to the tomb, wondering how they would roll away the stone. Mark's gospel demonstrates how foolish and fountless were the women's concerns, for God had already gone ahead of them to raise Jesus from the dead and to roll away the stone.

I remember a time when I experienced a stone obstacle. A family member was in crisis. I had been to my hometown twice one month to assist in getting appropriate care in place for this person. Within 24 hours of returning home from the second trip, I received another phone call that was a cry for help. Living at a distance of over 200 miles away, I felt somewhat helpless, so I packed my bags again and headed to my family home. Raindrops fell on my windshield and teardrops rolled down my cheeks as I drove. I felt as if I was at a dead-end. I had exhausted all the resources I could think of to address the situation. All I had left to offer was my personal presence, in the hopes that just by being there for someone I could give them the hope to live. Suddenly a Quaker phrase began to ring in my mind, "Way will open. Way will open." Although I could not figure out how to find my way through this seemingly unsolvable maze, God would open the way forward. Where there was no way, at least no way that I could see, God would make a way. Indeed God did open the way. My presence helped to chip away at the stone of anxiety that seemed to imprison my family member so that life could eventually go on.

God opened a way when it seemed as if there was no way through. That which seemed impossible suddenly became possible.

It took a while for the good news to sink in for the women at the tomb. Mark's gospel continued to find them in fear and shock, even near paralysis, as they left the empty tomb. Mark tells us that they were so afraid that they chose not to tell anyone what they saw, in spite of the instructions of the man in the grave. He told them to go and tell the disciples and Peter that they would meet Jesus in Galilee, for he was going before them. But the women told no one. But we know that sometime, somehow the story was told and recorded in Mark's gospel and Matthew, Luke, and John. Once the startling news settled in, the story was told and continues to be told

today. The stone of fear was rolled away, revealing a story of mystery, wonder, and resurrection. Mark's story ends abruptly, before the good news was really embraced by the disciples. We don't know how long it took; perhaps it happened when they finally met Jesus again in Galilee, as the angel said they would.

Sometimes it takes the stones that inhibit and hinder us a while to be rolled away, for the good news to dawn, for the experience of new life to take hold. But that does not mean that God is not at work, moving in the midst of our circumstances to chip away at the concrete mold that entombs us. The Spirit of God cannot be quenched; it will move in our lives whether we want it to or not, whether we are aware of it or not. Of course, life is far richer when we are conscious, but sometimes we choose to be blind or deaf to the presence of God.

The good news of Easter is that "way will open," the stones that hinder us, frighten us, and prevent our forward movement will be rolled away. Jesus is going before us to Galilee, to the ordinary commonplace events of our lives to enable the way to open, the stones to be rolled away.

The world, of course, is far larger than our small corners. Jesus is also on the move throughout the world to overturn the stones of injustice, imperialism, domination, power, and corruption that block the way of life and resurrection for many. Because we humans have crafted huge stones with the capacity to crush the life out of many other humans, Jesus cannot roll those stones away alone. We must recognize the boulders of our own design which hinder the way of God in the world. We must allow them to be dismantled and we must participate in their undoing. Like Jesus, we must say no to the forces of death and evil, so that life, justice, and goodness will prevail. We must use our power for the powerless, to roll away the stones of genocide, unnecessary armaments, economic injustice, so that all of God's people may live free of fear, free to live abundantly.

In a small Ontario town, there lived a man named Pete with a genius for reaching out to children. In the little church he ran a program attracting 75 or more children a week. One child, Marty, knew absolutely nothing about Christianity. When he first entered the sanctuary he looked at the ornate chairs in the front and asked, "What chair does God sit in?"

One day Pete decided to tell the gospel story. The group created an artificial campfire in the darkened church basement around which the young people sat in a circle. Pete entered the circle dressed as a shepherd and told the story. As he drew the children with him into an upper room and out into a garden where Jesus was betrayed by friends, as he told of the beatings by enemies, Marty grew more and more visibly distressed. Finally, when Jesus

was hanged from a cross and when he actually died, Marty could take it no longer. “Oh mannnnnn!” he cried. A child from the church sitting next to him laid his hand on Marty’s arm and said, “It’s all right, Marty. It’s not over yet.”¹

The angel said to the women stunned at the empty tomb, “It’s all right. It’s not over yet. Jesus has been raised; he is not here. 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.”

My friends, your story isn’t over yet. The stones which crush the life out of you and others will be rolled away. Jesus is going ahead of you to open the way before you, to roll away the boulders that weigh you down, the rocks that block the pathway forward.

Don’t be afraid, for Christ is risen! Alleluia! Alleluia!

¹ Rev. Dr. Stephen C. Farris, “It’s Not Over Yet” – Preaching Lent and Easter, *The Living Pulpit*, April-June 2006, pp. 32-33.

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