

“Stone Rolling”

Mark 16.1-8

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During the season of Lent, our Seekers group here at Plymouth has been studying a wonderful book by Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan called *The Last Week*. The authors use only Mark’s story of the week between Palm Sunday and Easter. We usually get the mix-and-match approach with a bit of Mark, a chunk of Matthew, a smidgen of Luke, and a whole lot of John. Mark’s gospel is, of course, the earliest in the New Testament, and it’s fascinating just to read this account on its own, because it is the first known literary interpretation of the story of Jesus. This is the story you’d have had at your disposal if you were, say, a Christian in Syria in the year 75.

This may be news to you, but Mark was not a Hollywood screenwriter...or even a Victorian novelist. His prose is blunt and rough, and Mark’s entire gospel abruptly ends with today’s passage...just like you heard it: “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.” That’s it. Full stop. Signing off. End of gospel.

In subsequent centuries, two separate editors added their own endings to the gospel, wrapping things up more tidily, manufacturing a denouement on Mark’s behalf.

But Mark leaves us with an empty tomb and scared, silent witnesses. That’s a bit unsettling, isn’t it? It makes us uncomfortable. Having read the other gospel accounts and Paul’s experience of the risen Christ, we want a bodily resurrection, a spiritual resurrection...something! We want a conclusive ending, but that isn’t what we get. And because there is no ending to the story, we each have to imagine our own.

John’s gospel provides the wonderful images that we often relate to: being a critical thinker like Thomas, who needs the empirical evidence yielded by poking his fingers in Jesus’ wounded hands, in order to grasp that Jesus is physically present. And the two dejected followers who are walking on the road to Emmaus, who fail to recognize Jesus as he walks alongside them, but who is made known to them in the breaking of the bread. But all Mark leaves us with is an empty tomb!

So, what conclusion do you imagine for Mark’s gospel? What happens to the risen one? ...to the women who find the empty tomb?

The earliest biblical accounts of resurrection are actually not in the gospel accounts that we read every Easter, but rather from Paul, who wrote before Mark. Paul has a different story of what resurrection is all about because not only did he miss the Sunday of Jesus’ resurrection, he never even met the man who was a walking, talking, teaching, breathing, preaching, table-turning prophet. The only encounter he had was with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, years after the crucifixion. He wrote to the church in Rome about 25 years after Jesus’ crucifixion saying, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, **so we too might walk in the newness of life.**”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 6.4

In what ways has the risen Christ been present to you? How are you experiencing the “newness of life?” How have you died to an old way of thinking or living only to discover new life? Have you encountered transformation in the midst of your everyday life? The story of resurrection is not over! It’s an ongoing drama; **your life is the stage, and you are the actors.**



Going back to the story, did you notice what happened to the disciples – “the Twelve” – in this narrative? They’re long gone; they’ve fled. Joseph of Arimathea provides the tomb, secures Jesus’ body from Pilate, takes Jesus’ body down from the cross, wraps his body in a linen shroud, entombs Jesus, and he himself rolls the stone to seal the tomb.

Did you notice that Mark not only fails to give Jesus any lines, he doesn’t even include Jesus in the scene? He is absent... only his empty tomb reflects its former occupant.

Aside from Joseph – who is not a disciple, but a member of the council – it is the women who are the central characters in this narrative. It is they who demonstrate their faithfulness by staying near Jesus every step of the way. While one of the Twelve betrays Jesus, another denies him, and the rest desert him, the women stay the course. It isn’t the Palm Sunday crowd or the Twelve disciples we are meant to follow, it is Jesus and the women.

Imagine for a moment being one of those women, what they witnessed on Good Friday. Imagine your intense grief on the following day, Saturday...the Sabbath: when you could only make plans to return to the tomb and anoint Jesus’ body with aromatic spices. This isn’t a pleasant task. If Jesus had died 36 hours earlier, you would expect some decomposition would already have taken place, hence the aromatic herbs.

So, you gather the spices and set out for the tomb early Sunday morning. You steel yourself for the final act of devotion and honor, to anoint Jesus’ body. The sun is rising as you walk with two other women toward the tomb. And then you have an awful realization: you won’t be able to get in. The tomb is sealed with a very large stone, and you ask your companions, “Who will roll the stone away for us?”

Let’s assume for a moment that it wasn’t a grave robber who rolled the stone away, but rather the “young man dressed in a white robe.” Is he an angel? If he’s an angel with superhuman ability, it’s no big deal to roll away stone. But Mark says nothing about him being anything other than a human. “A young man” does not necessarily an angel make. Mark uses the Greek word, *neaniskos* (young man), while elsewhere in the gospel, he uses the word *angelos* to describe a messenger of God. Mark leaves it up to us to determine who the young man was: for many of us have entertained angels unawares. And some of us have been messengers of God without even knowing it.

What if you were approaching the tomb: who would move the stone for you?

Sometimes, we need someone to help roll the stone away so that we can experience the risen Christ. And at other times we ourselves can help roll the stone away for others...rarely can we do it all on our own. Like that young man in the white robe, who contrasts the mourning all around him, we can be a voice of hope, saying, “He has been raised; he is not here.”



You've probably read about some big-time stone-rollers if you've been around awhile: Gandhi, King, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and others. But where are the great stone-rollers of our day? Who is saying "no" to death and "yes" to abundant life? I have seen a few like The Rev. Dr. William Barber, the Disciples of Christ minister who leads Repairers of the Breach and the Poor People's Campaign.

But some of the mightiest stone-rollers I have seen have just walked through the Good Friday experience of a school shooting. They are young people with names like Tyra and Emma and David. They not obediently staying in the dark shadows of the tomb, but rather rolling the stone away.

Whether the world sees us as Nobel laureates or nobodies, by virtue of our baptism and our faith, we are called to roll away the stone for each other. Each of us has the capacity to show up for our fellow humans and help create a new beginning, a new insight, even a new life.

Will you pray with me?

Holy One, you have showed us once more that death is never your final word. Help us to be agents of your grace and messengers of your peace, that in rolling the stone away for others, we, too, might experience resurrection.

Amen.