

Sermon: "The stone isn't where you left it"

Date: April 4, 2021

Scriptures: Mark 16:1-8

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Today is a day of great joy! The grave is empty, Christ has risen, and all around the world the people of God celebrate that there is victory over death. Today is the day we celebrate people looking for one thing and finding another. Today is the day when even the most inevitable parts of life found itself set aside for the glory of God.

It is difficult to express how shocking it must have been to wake up that first Easter morning with the mindset of someone who was expecting to continue the grieving process. As difficult as it must have been, there were things that needed to be done. Christ's body would need to be taken care of as it lay in the tomb. Even as Christ's friends and family grieved, there were things that had to be done.

Christ's body would need to be cleaned, anointments applied, and the body rewrapped for an eternal slumber. There were rituals to be performed, prayers to be said, and tears that would need to be shed. There were a great many difficult things that needed to be done, but first that huge stone would have to be moved.

Matthew 27 gives us a glimpse as to why this was such a big deal. Beyond the physical challenge of moving a gigantic stone, Matthew's gospel records the fact that the stone itself was sealed in a way that would show if the tomb had been disturbed. The whole scene lifts up questions for us that may have been running through the heads of the people on the way to the tomb? Who will roll away the stone? If there is nobody to open the stone, will they get in trouble for disturbing the seal? Is there even more grief on the way if they simply seek to care for the young Rabbi's body?

All of these questions make sense. These are questions that would almost inevitably apply after any death. Dead people normally stay dead: that is the reality for almost everyone in the world at this point. Even in a post resurrection world, we expect that life after death will be different for at least a while. Most of the people we have buried are still awaiting resurrection. Most dead people generally stay dead. The group on the way to the tomb was expecting many challenges, but likely not the one they found.

When the group arrives, the script changes drastically. The stone isn't where they left it. That is problematic enough, but there's more: there's no body in the tomb. In other accounts, we find Mary crying while wondering where Christ has gone. Instead of finding a body to care for, the people find an empty space. In Mark's gospel, rather than a dead man they find a living messenger who tells them that Christ is on the way to Galilee.

To say that the experience was jarring is a vast understatement. There's a reason why the events of Easter Sunday are some of the most questioned events in our faith. How could Christ rise from the dead? Why would anyone believe that Jesus would rise so long after death? What if someone simply took his body? The questions are further exacerbated by the way that this ending to Mark's gospel states that Jesus will meet them in Galilee while other gospels have Jesus showing up in Jerusalem that very night. The questions raised are challenging and have caused many to think of this celebration as nothing more than religious naivety at best and a religious hoax at worst.

Still, for nearly 2,000 years the church has continued to celebrate this resurrection. We have put at the center of our faith the very thing that the world considers foolish. To be frank, we have gone beyond accepting that which the world considers foolish to embracing and celebrating the very thing that is so often ignored or despised. We exult in our own strangeness. We have lived up to the words of 1 Corinthians 5:25 when it says, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

At the heart of our faith is the understanding that Christ's resurrection brings us hope. We cannot ignore the events of Easter Sunday because they rest as part of the very foundation of our belief. Romans 6:5-11 says:

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

On this day, it is true that the tomb did not hold the body of Jesus of Nazareth. Upon entering the tomb, the body was not there. Christ was alive.

It is interesting to wonder how long it took the early Christians to connect the resurrection of Christ with their own promised resurrection. In the middle of the feelings of fear and awe, did they realize that their own graves would one day sit empty? In the middle of all of the amazing events, did anyone consider that their own lives had changed forever? How long did it take for the ancient prophecies of God's promise to connect with the events of this most blessed day?

In truth, we know that within a short while the church would come to understand differently the events of Easter. The Acts of the Apostles shares how the church began to understand and share the Good News that we share today. The world was already changing, but that first Sunday there may have been room for only a couple of simple truths: the stone was not where they left it and Christ was gone.

As we celebrate today, I hope you remember the joy of this most holy morning. May God bless you and keep you as you celebrate this day. Wherever you are and however you will celebrate today, I pray that God will fill your hearts with joy and hope. Let us celebrate God's strange foolishness together in prayer...