

ROLL THE STONE AWAY!
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Reading: Mark 16: 1 – 8 (NRSV)

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.

If there is a single major theme in the Christian faith it is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It is also one of the most problematic themes in our faith. We have been so intellectually shaped by the values of the Enlightenment, especially the processes of logic and the science, that it is difficult for us to claim or be claimed by this story. And quite frankly there is no process by which we can rationalize the various resurrection ideas of the New Testament. There are some biblical scholars that will argue that they cannot find historical justification for the

resurrection of Jesus. But some wonder if Christianity would ever have emerged out of the first century without the gospel of the resurrection.

This morning I will not try to argue for or against the resurrection as a matter of physiology or history. I do believe, however, that this is an essential faith story that asks us not to focus on literal details as matters of verifiable fact, but rather to focus on the sepulcher of the human heart.

The truth is that those brave women in Mark's gospel are a lot like us. They were grief stricken by his death. Like the disciples they may have believed that this whole grand adventure of God's incarnation was over. In their minds Rome had proven more powerful than the imperial rule of God. Their hearts were fraught with fear and guilt. They did not know what was in the future.

As we all do when someone dies our first order of attention is the care for and preparation of the body for a proper burial. The women were filled with tangible and practical problems like how they would ever enter the tomb in the first place.

A burial tomb in that day might have been something like a cave. Inside were multiple niches for individual bodies. The opening of the tomb was covered by a large, round stone, something like a huge wheel. The wheel rested in carved out tracks so that it could be rolled back and

forth to open or close the cave. It needed to be heavy enough that the tomb could be protected against marauding dogs or thieves. The women knew that they would not be strong enough to roll the door away.

Their purpose was to anoint the body of Jesus with fragrant spices and oils. This was the common practice and thought to be the proper way to tend to the dead. Because Jesus was buried so quickly after his death such loving care of his body was not possible. In the same way we may find a suit of clothes or dress to clothe our dead ones. Someone may even style their hair. Accessories such as glasses, rings, and necklaces are part of the presentation.

From the most primitive tribes to the most sophisticated civilizations, human funerary practices are a fascinating witness to the human effort to appropriate the meaning of death. We cannot help but wonder what happens to us when we die. We go to elaborate measures to honor the dead and express our hope for the future. And in almost every demonstration we are focused on the body. That was what the women in Mark's story came to attend to.

But I wonder if the story is trying to refocus our attention. Perhaps the gospel is trying to tell us that our minds and our hearts are set on the wrong object. Maybe we need to roll away the stone of morbidity and

open our hearts to the hope that is stronger than death, a justice that is greater than empire, and God's love that transcends the broken human condition. Like the women at the empty tomb what do we have left when the body of Jesus is gone?

The fifth century church father, Peter Chrysologus, wrote a similar question:

“Is it from the door of the sepulcher, or of your or hearts? From the tomb, or from your own eyes? You whose heart is shut, whose eyes are closed, are unable to discover the glory of the open grave. Pour then your oil, if you wish to see that glory, not on the body of the Lord, but the eyes of your heart. By the light of faith you will then see that which through the deficiency of faith now lies hidden in darkness.”

If other words, if we are looking for dead bodies, we are looking for the wrong thing. If we imagine that the resurrection is about theories of science, history, or biblical scholarship, we are at the wrong tomb. The empty tomb is not an appropriate location for an episode of “Crime Scene Investigators.” The resurrection is not about forensics. The resurrection is about what St. Paul called “A New Creation.” The resurrection is about extravagant communities of hospitality.

The body of Jesus, of necessity, must be removed. It must be risen above our preoccupations with the corpus. The tomb must be empty if we are to be truly claimed by the good news that God's justice is greater than

any imperial system, regardless of Caesar's name. Death has no victory over God's grace. Jesus the Christ is not to be found in death shrouds or perfumes. Jesus the Christ is present in those communities of faith where everyone has a place at the table; where forgiveness is the key to every relationship; where compassion is the hallmark of our relationships with one another. Jesus the Christ is among us as we feed the hungry, give water to parched throats, or sit with those who are ill or dying or in prison. These are the places we should go to if we want to find the risen Christ.

Sometimes I wonder if we want to stay focused on the body or argue about the resurrection as a means of avoiding this radically inclusive community I have just described. It is a lot more comfortable to debate facts and theories and biblical conundrums. Much more is demanded of us when it comes time to house the homeless, console the divorcee, or seek forgiveness from one another when we have been arrogant and rude. It is a lot more fun to prove a point in a debate than it is for me to confess my hypocrisy and discipline my soul.

If we are going to roll away any stones this morning may it be the stones that protect our hearts from the pain of others; the stones that shield our eyes from the suffering of others; and the stones that darken the reality of our own frailty. Let us roll the stone away and open our souls to the

promise of life that the risen Christ represents. Let us open our lives to the future of others with the kind of future that God imagines.

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