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Mark 16:1-8

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. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. ⁷But 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.” ⁸So 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.

Reflection

It's Easter Sunday, but did you ever imagine you would be celebrating Easter from your home in front of your computer or smartphone or tablet? In my 30-some years of leading Easter services, I've

never experienced an Easter like this. In conversations in small groups on Zoom this week, I heard several people say this Easter will be the first one without extended family gathered around the table for a meal. Even my children who had planned to travel here for Easter and visit with their grandparents have canceled their trips, knowing the risks involved with such a journey.

It's just not the same, even though we've tried to decorate our sanctuary for the occasion. You may have noticed that we removed the rocking chair from previous weeks, for the chair had reminded us during Lent to slow down and take time to center our hearts on God. None of us ever imagined a Lent where slowing down would become an absolute stop as business, churches, schools, and much of lives have shut down.

It's a strange feeling to have our lives turned upside down, to have our routines shattered by unexpected forces. I imagine the disciples of Jesus may have felt a similar way as they saw Jesus carried away and hung on a cross to die. His closest followers had been with him three years, leaving

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everything behind to follow him around the countryside, listening to him teach, seeing him heal those with illnesses, and helping him feed the hungry crowds.

And then all of a sudden, everything came to a dead stop, for their teacher and friend was dead. Several days later three women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with fragrant herbs and spices, a common practice to lessen the decaying smell of the body and to show respect to a loved one.

On the way there, they asked one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" That was a very good question, for some suggest the stone could have been anywhere from 1/3-ton to 2-tons in weight. While some tombs were sealed with a round disc-shaped stones, many more were sealed with a square cork-shaped stone. Either way, it would have been difficult for three women to move the stone from the entrance of the tomb.

Have you ever found yourself facing large stones in life, those things that seem to block your way? At one time or another, I imagine every one of us has

faced an obstacle in life, but the weight seems so much heavier now in these uncertain times, doesn't it? Many now face the large stone of unemployment, having had a good job that suddenly ended as we shut down our nation to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Many families feel the weight of unpaid bills and the inability to purchase needed items for their families.

Families who have a loved one infected with the coronavirus feel the weight of the question of their own survival, in addition to having to keep everyone in quarantine.

Doctors and nurses, chaplains and staff, those in our hospitals feel the weight of the additional stress of wondering if they could be infected as they provide care for patients.

Children who no longer have the routine of going to school feel the weight of the sudden change in their lives, mixed with the fear that their parents may express.

It's a hard stone to move out of the way, for no matter what we may try to do, this virus has reminded us of our vulnerability. We may feel as

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though we need to do *something*, like the women who wanted to anoint Jesus' body, but when we're told the best thing to do is stay home and do nothing, we too may wonder how we can move away the stone of the feelings of isolation.

In the Gospel of Mark, when the women arrived at the tomb, they found that the stone had been moved away, and they heard the amazing news that Jesus had been raised. Further instruction invited them to go tell the rest of the disciples they would all see Jesus again. But did you notice how Mark's story ends? The women fled from the tomb in fear, and as Mark explained, "for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

They found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, but the stone of fear and confusion prevented them from telling anyone what had happened!

Sometimes those stones we face seem too huge to get past, so we remain dormant, unable to respond, stuck. That's a tempting reaction in the

midst of our stay-at-home order, to get stuck in loneliness or depression or anxiety.

Sometimes we may get stuck in ideas that don't help us live life to its fullest, as sculptor Gutzon Borglum realized when commissioned by the Ku Klux Klan to create a sculpture. After noticing the infighting in the group, he destroyed his samples and ran from the group.

From this scandalous experience, he used his skills beginning in 1927 at the age of 60 to carve out of stone the heads of four presidents on Mt. Rushmore over the last 14 years of his life. The stones he faced he turned into memorable carvings, and he's also well known for his sculpture in our nation's Capitol of the head of Abraham Lincoln.

He had cut it from a large square block of stone in his studio. One day, when the face of Lincoln was just becoming recognizable in the stone, a young girl was visiting the studio with her parents. She looked at the half-done face of Lincoln, her eyes registering wonder and astonishment. She stared at the piece for a moment and then ran to the sculptor and asked, "Is that Abraham Lincoln?"

"Yes," he replied.

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The little girl said, “Well, how in the world did you know that he was in that block of stone?”¹

What a great question, especially on this Easter Sunday. Not only may we wonder how we’ll get the stone rolled away, we might wonder what’s inside as well.

Mark’s Gospel leaves us hanging about what to say about the rock rolled away from the empty tomb, but on this Easter Sunday, we remember the rest of the story—for we know the details of the other Gospel writers: Jesus has risen. Aren’t you glad there is more than one record of what happened that day?

Matthew, Luke, and John inform us that Jesus was not in the tomb because he was alive. Somehow the stone of death had been rolled away! If you look closely in your Bible, you may even notice an

addition to the Gospel of Mark. Since this was the first Gospel written, the writer may have left the story open ended, leaving future generations to discern how the story ends. Or maybe the ending got lost. Either way, within a hundred years or so, someone added another ending to the book, telling of the resurrection of Jesus.

We know about that rolling stone and what happened to Jesus. Nothing can change that good news. Not the distance of 2000 years. Not the social distancing of this year. Christ has risen, so roll away your stones of despair and celebrate that new life is among us. Alleluia!

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 5566-5570). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #971.