

“Roll Back My Stone, Lord!”
Mark 16:1-8
© Stacey Steck
Preached April 8, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that as the sun set on one day and rose on the next that Jesus’ disciples were demoralized, beaten down, really and truly afraid. Even if you didn’t hear again in church this week the awful story of Jesus death, you’ve probably heard it before. It may be the best-known story in human history, for a little while longer at least. It is, of course, a little distant from the life most of us have experienced. Our present day public executions are just a little more sanitized, our trials and verdicts take a little longer to conclude, our appeals last for years; by the time it is all over, there is a considerable disconnect from the original event. The public figures we adore usually turn out to have clay feet, which are only made more visible when they retire or die. Few of us have really, really given up everything to follow anyone, much less Jesus. But let’s try to imagine ourselves as those disciples who had just seen such horror, and let’s see where that takes us.

If it is true, as the Gospel accounts suggest, that many had given up everything to follow Jesus, these faithful ones faced the prospect of returning to their homes and villages and families with their proverbial tails between their legs, or deciding that there would be too much shame in that, to figure out how to start over again, starting with nothing but broken hearts and shattered dreams. I don’t

know how soon after Jesus breathed his last and gave up his spirit that they would have begun to formulate these thoughts, but if it were me, it wouldn't have been long. I'd already have been thinking not only about what was next, but also about what was *not* next. Maybe that left them in a kind of limbo state, not quite ready to give it all up, but also knowing it wasn't going anywhere. And maybe that is how the two Marys and Salome found themselves as they made their way to the tomb on that first day of the week, asking themselves, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb." Yes, they had the spices. Yes, they went with the intention of anointing Jesus' body. Yes, they went there together to grieve his loss. But it wasn't really his tomb they were talking about.

You see, it wasn't really Jesus sealed up in that tomb at all. Well, it was *him*, but what I want to suggest to you is that what was crucified, dead and buried in that tomb, were the hopes and dreams of his disciples and family. Yes, there was the normal grief people experience when someone they love dies, but there would also have been all the expectations of the coming kingdom, all the longing for yet more wisdom from his mouth, more healing from his hands, more life from his life. All of that was shattered, all of that hung on the cross too, just as the Romans had planned, for that was the purpose of a public execution such as a crucifixion. It is a lot less work to simply separate a man's head from his body, a la Herod and John the Baptist. The executioner's blade easily does the job of fulfilling a death sentence. But to make an example of someone, to put the fear of the Emperor into

someone's friends and followers, something more is needed, something like a preemptive strike at witness intimidation, something like a crucifixion. And so, even though it was Jesus who was crucified, it was the family and disciples of Jesus who received a stake through the heart.

We all have fantasies about how good life should be, but we also all know the reality that life can be pretty hard. Even if we have not suffered as severely as some others have suffered, we still know pain and loss and loneliness and jealousy. People we know and love die. Dreams from our childhood go unfulfilled. We are subject to disappointment and heartache and trauma, and for some of us abuse and abandonment. We know well our own failures, and we can recount quickly the times others have failed us. If any of this is a surprise to anyone in this room, praise God for you and that blessed life the rest of us look at in envy. But for the rest of us, at some level, there is a tomb somewhere in which part of us is trapped behind a stone too large and too heavy for us to move on our own, especially from the inside. It may be depression, it may be an estranged relationship with a parent or child. It may be an addiction or a too-strong desire, or burning shame. It may be a grudge or a secret or a wound. It may be shattered hopes and broken dreams like the Marys and Salome, and all the other disciples that day. At the very least we can say that we are trapped daily in that tomb by sin, for none of us is perfect. Christ may not be in that tomb, but we are, and we long to get out, and we wonder, "Who will roll away the stone for us?"

And this, of course, is the question Easter answers, and no, the answer is not a young man, dressed in a white robe, as the women found sitting there. It's God, of course, who rolled away the stone from Jesus' tomb, and the Marys' and Salome's tombs, and the disciples' tombs, and the Apostle Paul's tomb, and Saint Augustine's tomb, and John Calvin's tomb, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s tomb, and your tomb and my tomb. The power at work in the historic resurrection of Jesus is the same power at work in our resurrections, in the freedom granted us from our tombs. God does for us what no power on earth can do – not psychology, or medicine, or engineering or even creativity – God does for us what no power on earth can do, to free us from whatever binds us, because God loves us, in some inexplicable and blessedly divine way that shines forth on Easter more brightly than on any other day. God broke God's own rules to move that stone, to answer the women's question, to open up the door of life for you to pass right through, to grant you the freedom to really, really live the life we were intended to live. That's the answer Easter offers to our never-ending question, "But who will roll away the stone for us?"

There is an interesting aspect to the story in Mark's gospel, and that is, that in the earliest, most reliable manuscripts, the entire gospel ends where our reading tonight ends. They call it "the shorter ending of Mark" and it ends on this abrupt, fearful note we heard earlier, with the women fleeing from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were

afraid.” That’s it. That’s how it probably originally ended until someone centuries later felt like it lacked a little closure, oh, and an appearance by Jesus to kind of prove that although the tomb was empty, that he was actually resurrected. But I rather like the unresolved ending, because I think that it is a little more true to our lives today. You see, we don’t really get to see Jesus, do we? At least not face to face. No, we, like the women that day, we see the empty tomb, and we hear that Jesus is going on ahead of us, and that we will see him one day, but still the future is kind of uncertain. Our lives could still go any which way. Certainly that was the case for Peter and James and Paul and Barnabas and all the rest, who were carried along by this story to places they never could have imagined. This is not a happily-ever-after, let-the-credits-roll kind of a story, this Gospel of ours, but a finding-true-joy-and-contentment-in-whatever-situation-we-may-find-ourselves-in-as-a-result-of-following-Jesus story. It is a dream-come-true story, but with the dreams God dreams for us. Even when we are set free from our tombs, we don’t really know what awaits us, either among whatever friends and family to whom we may return, or to a new place, meeting new people, getting settled into a new life. Only God knows, and God invites us to find out what happens after the shorter ending of Mark, or Mary, or Salome, or Peter, or any one of us. I could call out some of your names too, not because I know of any skeletons in your closets, but because God calls your name, like Jesus did when he called Lazarus out of the tomb, into life and life abundant.

The glory of Easter is not just that the tomb is empty, but that Jesus goes ahead of us, not to Galilee, but to each of our futures, rolling away the rocks and opening our tombs, releasing us, and our hopes, and our dreams. We may find ourselves seized with terror, for freedom is a strange and scary thing, but it won't take long for God to lead us into the peace Jesus promised. May God bless us as we take those first steps out of our tombs, and into freedom. Amen.