

“Moving Your Stones”
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Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008
East Cobb United Methodist Church

Scripture: John 20:1-18
Prayer

Rocks are hard. They have no life. They do not do anything, but they often present difficulties regardless of their size. Did you ever get a small stone in your shoe? When you did, nothing else mattered until you could stop and get that painful annoyance out of your shoe. The stone became a preoccupation because it hurt. Stones often get in the way of what we need to do and where we need to go. A rock slide can close a mountain highway and cause us to travel many miles out of the way to reach our destination.

Stones sometimes are assigned value far beyond the value of the rocks themselves. Look at the stones the children of Israel stacked at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19-24). They were just river stones until Joshua directed the placement of the stones and taught the Israelites that the stones represented their deliverance into the promised land by God. The five smooth stones David took were insignificant until they were placed in the hands of the one whom God would anoint as King of Israel. Through David's obedience, those stones became the instruments of deliverance from the Philistines and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:31-54). The stones Satan used to tempt Jesus were just stones until the possibility was raised that they could become bread (Matthew 4:3-4). The stones that were raised high to stone the woman caught in adultery were just meaningless inert objects until the crowd picked them up and threatened to hurl them in anger and judgment (John 8:3-11). When the crowd hailed Jesus as King on that Palm/ Passion Sunday, the Pharisees wanted them to stop. Jesus' replied that if the crowd were silent, the very stones would cry out (Luke 19:37-40).

We use great stones and stone structures to honor those who have achieved much or to perpetuate the memory of those who have gone before. But generally, stones are not something we like in our pathway. They are fine in our décor and as accents in our gardens, but we don't want them in our paths and interfering with our plans. When we build highways, we blast through the stones making up the hills that need to be leveled so the road can go forward. We generally take the stones for granted until they get in our way. What stones are standing firmly as obstacles in your life this morning? Do you need help getting them out of the way? Do you need help moving your stones?

On that first Easter morning, there was a stone in the way. No one had thought about it a lot, but in the back of everyone's mind, it was there. To the Romans and the Sanhedrin, it was security that would assure the body of the dead Jesus

would remain in the tomb and not be stolen. To the close friends of Jesus, it represented the finality of death. But it also represented to Mary an obstacle to doing the last tender, loving thing she could do for her Lord. She and the others (referenced in the other gospels) had come to complete the anointing that there was not time for after Jesus died. It had been the day of Preparation, that Friday we call "Good." The day the lambs were being slain for the celebration of the Passover. Sabbath was coming quickly at sundown on Friday, so there was no time to give Jesus a "proper" burial. All that would have to wait. Mary came now hoping to complete the labor of love that had been denied because of the setting of the sun on Friday.

This was a sad journey but an act that showed the faithfulness of these women to Jesus even in death. Faithfulness has a way of running into surprises. When we go on in faith, even in times of darkness, disappointment, and despair, we often meet the unexpected. But Mary was worrying about worldly things – like how to move that massive stone! No one thought ahead to ask the men to come with them. The stone was a formidable barrier. It was too heavy. It rolled into place with the pull of gravity for Joseph and Nicodemus, but it would take strong men to roll that stone uphill in its track to open the tomb. Mary had not planned for that. There was no earthly solution to their worries, but God had the answer! **No stone is ever the final act when it is rolled up against an event in which God is a part.** Love's redeeming work was done, and God's love still moves the stones of life and even death itself.

Surprisingly, the stone had been rolled away. The body was gone. This was no robbery, no trickery, no hoax or deceit. The women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. God always has an answer for immovable stones. Who will roll them away? Who will roll away the heavy weight of grief? –And that feeling that life no longer has any meaning? God has rolled away the stones that block our way, and he has rolled away the stones that prevent him from being present in our lives. When the stone was rolled away on that first Easter morning – a morning like this one – the tomb ceased to be a blind alley and became a thoroughfare. It is no longer an end of life, but a proclamation that life cannot be taken away from those who belong to God. Because of Christ, there is nothing permanent about the tomb since the power of earth and even the power of death itself have been overcome.

The tomb was open, but all of the apprehension about moving the stone was replaced immediately by the terror and amazement of finding the tomb empty and seeing two angels where Jesus' body had been. The cross had subdued him, but the tomb was empty. The only event that could have transformed the entire world had taken place. But Mary was amazed and distressed. She was stunned. It was too awful and good to be true at the same time – and many still do not believe for those very reasons.

Mary ran and told Peter and John who raced to the tomb. She was not announcing the resurrection. Rather it was a missing body report. She thought someone had taken the body of her Lord. John got there first, but Peter went in first. Although scripture says they saw and believed, their actions cast doubt on that claim. Mary and the others were looking for what they expected to find – the body of their beloved Lord. They were not prepared for what really happened.

Remember that the stone was not removed to let Jesus out. He did not need that. After all, later that day he materialized through solid walls and locked doors. The stone was moved so that Mary, Peter, and John could see in. God is in the business of moving stones so that we can more clearly see his will and purpose for us. He moves stones so we are not held in deadly habits and sinful places. He moves stones that divide and create hostility and resentment. He moves stones that release the courage to live the lives he intends us to live. He moved that stone to show all humanity for all time that his redeeming work is done.

The promise of the empty tomb is new life – not just for a day or two, but forever! That is really hard to see when there are still stones in the way. Our lives are full of stones and other seemingly immovable obstacles. We try to pretend that the stones of life really aren't there. We do not want others to know of the stones that prevent us from experiencing the full life God intended. We try to move them alone. Or we live in the pain that the weight of the stone imposes upon us.

Some of the stones are there because we put them there. We want parts of our lives to be off limits to God, so we try to put him out of sight and out of mind so that our sinfulness can be rationalized. We bury Christ again every time we put selfish interests above his direction for our lives. We bury him when what we do in his name becomes routine and meaningless. We bury him when we lose the passion for serving him because things just did not go the way we want. He has been buried in the routine of the church. We have wrapped the face of our Lord in winding sheets of philosophy and metaphysics. We have attempted to imprison him in stained glass, bury him in a book, and entomb him in an organization. But this incarnate God – this Jesus – comes forth from every man-made tomb. Jesus' triumph over death and the grave tells us that, while we have stones too big for us to budge, there are no stones that can contain the power of God that was made evident in the resurrection. No tomb will ever hold the conqueror of death.

Bishop William Willimon, in a work entitled *Easter As An Earthquake*, gives us a fresh perspective:

"When the stone was rolled away, and the earth shook, we got our first glimpse of a new world, a world where death doesn't have the last word, a world where injustice is made right, and innocent suffering is vindicated by the intrusion of a powerful God. The women came out to the cemetery to write one more chapter in the long sad story of death's ascendancy, one more episode of how the good

always get it in the end. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper of resignation at death's dark victory.”

"And then – the earth heaved, an angel appeared, the stone was rolled away, Caesar's soldiers shook. The angel plopped himself down on the stone in one final act of impudent defiance of death, and the soldiers and all that, and said to the women, 'Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus? He isn't here.' Then that angel turned to the soldiers and said, 'Be afraid. Everything your world is built on is being shaken.'"

“Nobody went back the same way they came.”

The words of Mary to skeptical and anguished disciples: “I have seen the Lord!” The first sharing of the good news! The gospel. The joy of the truth that Mary shared should motivate us to leave no stone unturned. Allow him to move the stones that prevent access. Allow him to remove the stones that we use to confine him. And then, go and tell those who do not know the awesome news that he lives!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayer