

## “Rolling Away the Stone”

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First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, April 8, 2012

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6-9

New Testament Lesson: Mark 16:1-8

A father and his little boy were driving down a country road on a beautiful spring morning, not unlike what we have here today. Suddenly out of nowhere a bumblebee flew through the open car window. The little boy was petrified; his parents had warned him that he was deathly allergic to bee stings. But the father was quick to reach out and grabbed the bee. He squeezed it gently in his hand, and then released it. Well, as soon as he let it go, the bee buzzed past the boy and he became frantic again. His father, seeing the boy's panic, extended his open hand and pointed with a nod. The stinger of the bee was still stuck in his skin. “Do you see this?” he said. “You don't need to be afraid anymore; there's no more sting in that bee!”

When the women encounter the empty tomb, they are alarmed, seized by terror and amazement, so much so that Mark tells us they go away and say “nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That's how Mark originally ended his account of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. But is that good news – hearing that Jesus is risen, that in him God conquers death and leads us to eternal life, only to go away saying nothing? They might as well have just rolled the stone back over the tomb and buried the whole thing forever. But, just like you can't put the stinger back in the bee, there's no rolling the stone back over the tomb of Jesus. And yet, can't you image being among those women on that first Easter morning some 2,000 years ago? We can imagine, can't we – arriving Sunday morning with the images of what we witnessed the past two days still fresh in our memory? We watch as Jesus' lifeless body, bloody and beaten, gets wrapped in a shroud and placed in the tomb. Men come and seal the grave; they roll a huge rock over its only entrance – no one in, and certainly no one coming out. The tomb is sealed and there wasn't even time to anoint his body.

As the sun sets on that Friday evening, the Sabbath begins and even such a sacred task as anointing cannot overcome the Lord's command to keep the Sabbath holy, as a day of rest when no work shall be done – not even the work of anointing a loved one for burial. Breaks your heart, doesn't it? And then, when Sunday arrives and the Jewish Sabbath is over, you rush to the tomb to perform that last bit of ministry for the Lord. You're almost there when one of you realizes, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” With all that Jesus has done in the presence of these women and in the lives of the other disciples, they're still clueless when it comes to the power of God to break down barriers. They still don't trust that God will make good on the word of the Lord, that God will fulfill in their lives and in the world the promise of an everlasting hope, peace, joy and love that not even death can set asunder. That's who Jesus Christ is for us and for the world – the embodiment of an everlasting hope, peace, joy and love. But to tap into this, we need to let Jesus out of the tomb and into our lives.

Today, we begin a three-part sermon series titled “Rolling Away the Stone,” which is also today's sermon. “A Life Revealed” is the title for next Sunday, followed by “What We Will Be” on April 22. Each of these sermons will touch on what gets in between us and God?

What gets in between who we are as ordinary people living ordinary lives and God's assurance of a hope, peace, joy and love that just can't die in our hearts, no matter how lifeless and beaten our bodies, minds, or spirits may feel from time to time? What has us roll the stones that block our progress in life back over the entrances and pathways that give us access to our God-given hopes & dreams and desires? What has us put the stinger back into that deadly bumblebee? What gets in between us and God?

The book "Sacred Bull: The Inner Obstacles That Hold You Back at Work and How to Overcome Them"<sup>1</sup> lists ten "Sacred Bulls" as the key assumptions we live by that are wrong. See if you recognize yourself in any of these.

- 1 – Denial: I don't see the problem so it isn't there.
- 2 – Blind Spots and Shortcuts: What I don't like can't be important.
- 3 – Self-Interest: Always look out for Number One.
- 4 – Mind Reading: People should know what I want without being told.
- 5 – Blame: If something goes wrong, it has to be somebody's fault.
- 6 – Being Nice: Avoid conflict at all cost. (That's a popular one).
- 7 – Perfection: If it's not perfect, it's nothing.
- 8 – Fairness: I don't need to negotiate for what I want; I just want fairness.
- 9 – Excuses: There's always a good reason why I don't follow the rules

everyone else works by. And No.10 – Being Right: There's a right way and a wrong way; my way is right. Do you recognize yourself in any of that – denial, blind spots and shortcuts, expecting people to read your mind, the tendency to look for blame in a situation, avoiding conflict at all costs, idolizing perfection and fairness, clinging to excuses, or always needing to be right, even when you just might be wrong? I don't know about you, but that fits me to a tee – oh, maybe not all the time, but certainly more often than I would like. And really, it's just part of the human condition, isn't it? Aren't these great examples of the "stones" that get in our way and block us from being all could be; all that God created us to be? We can all relate to some of this some of the time, if not most if this most of the time.

And that's where Christ comes in, or rather, that's when we need to have Christ out and about in our lives. This is our chance to roll away the stone and let Jesus out of the tomb, by recognizing when we sometimes are driven by an over-reaching need for self-preservation, a self-centered need to look good, an unhealthy need to be in control. This is our opportunity to recognize that there's something more to our life's struggles than meets the eye, that there's something truly wonderful inside us that God wants all the world to see. When we can recognize that and put our faith in that, that's when we're given the strength and confidence and inspiration to roll away all those pesky stones and let Christ into our lives and the lives of others. But really recognizing our true potential takes a special set of eyes, a special perspective on life, a special way of looking at things that overcomes all our fears and self-centered ambitions. If we can look at life more like Jesus Christ, we too will be lifted up above our limitations and placed on a higher plane. In Christ, everything that life holds for us has a kernel of hope, the promise of peace, joy that surprise, and love that is undeniable. But to find that, it takes a special set of eyes. Take for example this amusing story<sup>2</sup> about another little boy and his father. "Hey, Dad, watch!" said the boy as he threw the ball into the air and swung the bat as hard as he could, only to miss.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Bernstein and Sydney Craft Rozen, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> As told by Hal Brady, Dallas, Texas, 12 January 1992.

“Wait, Dad, watch this one,” he said. And for the second time the boy swung and missed. “Here’s the one, Dad!” said the boy, but the result was the same. Suddenly, the boy shouted: “Three strikes – and out. Gee, Dad, aren’t I a great pitcher?” Things aren’t always as they appear. Sometimes the struggles and failures we encounter in life are merely stones along our pathway hiding the joy and successes that await us. We all have access to God’s greatest desire for us, if only we would roll away the stones, and then keep from rolling them back into place. That really is our tendency, isn’t it – to make a little progress, have success right at our fingertips, only to fall two steps backward, get stopped cold in our tracks?

That’s what happened to the women at the tomb. After Jesus is risen, an angel of the Lord comes in his place and tells Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, “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 (what did they do?); they went out and fled from the tomb ... and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And even though Mark’s original gospel account ends there, we know that something else happened. We know that something more along the lines of what the other gospel writers added actually took place. We know that despite being overwhelmed with fear and amazement, the women joined in our Easter celebration; they went out and told of their encounter with an angel, an angel of the risen Lord. We know this because the story got out; it got out of the tomb and into our hearts. We know this because if these three women, as the only people there, didn’t tell about it, then the story of the empty tomb would never have been told, lost to history forever – and along with it, Jesus Christ, himself, at least for them; and maybe for us, too.

And yet, the risen Christ does live. Jesus does work in the world, there’s no question about it. You know it because God is working in your life – and if not in your life, if you can’t sense that for yourself, than in his life, or her life, or their lives. God is working in our life, as a community of faith, as families of this church, as neighbors and coworkers and classmates, as friends and loved ones. This church, this community of faith is one place that you can come to and see God working in the world today. This is a place you can come to and get a reality check on who you really are – who I really am – in the world and in my heart of hearts.

This is one place – not the only place, and not just here in this sanctuary but in all the places and times we, as a community of faith, gather, whether it’s for worship or mission projects or volunteer service, LOGOS or prayer or study, laughter or tears – this is one place, one gathering where we are sure to encounter the risen Lord, if we are open to it. Because this is one place where we can come to be reminded to encourage each other in our Christian walk, our spiritual journeys, a place we can come to find the courage and the grace to roll away the stones that get in between us and God. This is a place where you can come in with your fears and doubts and disappointments, not unlike the women at the tomb, and go out with the courage and strength of Christ’s strongest disciples. This is a place where no one, looking at what’s possible for you and your life in Jesus Christ, where no one can ever again question the power and love of God.

When you leave here today, when you pass through those doors and out into the world, back into your day-to-day lives, when you gather with family later today for a joyous Easter feast, or maybe just set aside a little time for yourself in the days to follow, and when you encounter a stone blocking you from being who God has called you to be, what will you do? What will you do with that stone – just leave it in the way, try to go around it only to have it come back in life later on?

Or will you remember when you encounter the little stones along life's pathways that there is a place you can go to get some help in rolling them away; that there is a group of people here for you, who will show you and remind you that, though the barriers in our lives can seem big and insurmountable, there is One who can handle them, and that one is God.

Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Holy God, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ this day. It is a day of joy, of singing and dancing, of feasting and proclaiming that Christ is alive and that we are set free from the power of sin and death.

We rejoice that because he is raised to new life, we also experience new and resurrected lives. That which has held us back need no longer define or limit us.

Those fears and anxieties that have kept us captive need no longer hold us in their grip. That which differentiates us from one another need not continue to separate us.

Your resurrection power frees us to choose love over fear, reconciliation over division, forgiveness over hatred, peace over violence.

Lord, let it be so. And where struggles continue, Lord, we pray for you to restore that which has been lost; to bring new life from that which seems hopeless; to create beauty from what we see as ugliness; to offer healing and hope where there appears to be only sickness and death. And by your Spirit, Lord God, embolden us to live courageously and faithfully in the promise and power and the truth of the empty tomb.

We ask all this for the sake of Jesus Christ, who taught us pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.