

Psalm 104:1-9  
Mark 16:1-8

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Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## Who Will Roll the Stone Away?

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?" (Mark 16:2-3)

Everyone here has or will face an immovable obstacle, perhaps even been traumatized by it. Death and the loss of a loved one, for example. Aloneness—"who will care for me." A medical emergency that casts a long dark shadow. A crucial exam upon which so much hope hangs. Addiction. Financial stress that threatens to imperil your family's future. Expectations that drain the marrow. These gigantic stones roll across the path we've chosen and seem to bar the way to whatever future we hoped for.

Three women come to Jesus' tomb bringing spices to anoint his body. It seems a lovely, faithful thing to do for a departed loved one. Yet they bring in their hands something far more enduring than aromatic spices. I had never noticed this until I worked on this text. In the chill of a morning barely this side of the dead of night, *knowing* the tomb is sealed with a great stone that they are powerless to remove—they wake no companions, bring no help. In fact their great spoken anxiety is "Who will roll the stone away?" Still, they come anyway, driven by faith.

"They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll the stone away for us?'" This unimaginable burden! The more I read that line, the more it sounds like—a prayer. Each step seems like a prayer. Not knowing, but pushing through anyway. Not propelled by anything beyond love, compassion, and wanting to end this horrible thing rightly by anointing their Lord and friend's mutilated body.

Their prayer is more than answered. Not only is the stone, "which was very large"—rolled away already, but a bewildering set of circumstances alarm them. As they enter, a flash of white challenges the darkness. A young man sits on the shelf where the body should be, dressed in a white robe, more like one at a baptism than a funeral rite. That's odd—just three days earlier, a young man, wearing nothing but a linen cloth, followed the disciples and Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane by night, after the holy supper. Well, whatever! Immediately he calms the three women and tells them Jesus, who was crucified, is risen and gone to Galilee. They are to tell the disciples "and Peter." The one who denied him. There, in the familiar land of Galilee, their home territory, *"there you will see him."*

Now, the very reason Jesus was crucified was because he was a threat to the powers. The reason the disciples abandoned Jesus at the cross, save for the women, was that they were terrified of losing their lives by association with him. The reason Peter denied Jesus, was out of fear of dying with him. Who wouldn't be? And now, these three women, who had been so faithful even beyond the grave, are expected to tell the little community holed up in the upper room, that it's *not over*. In fact, it's just beginning. And to cap it all, women in that culture had no legitimate voice. They could not even give evidence in a court of law, let alone convince everyone sequestered in fear and trembling that it's really just beginning. No wonder they fled like lemmings heading for a precipice for, as Mark ends his Gospel story, "terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Or as the Greek ungrammatically, yet very startlingly, puts it, "they were afraid for . . ."

If the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb was big, the stone that now stood against their little community's future must have seemed like a rock face. But this, of course, is very far from the end.

Consider for a moment, especially in the context of your own hard times. First you need to work some great challenge through whose outcome seems irreconcilable with mere reason, and the obstacles and challenges you must face. Second, you feel you must press on, even when hope has just been crucified by the additional news of what you will have to bear. And in the midst of this trial by fire its unimagined consequences take hold, and all you want to do is hide, or retreat, or break away even from those who support you. And God, whom the pastor told you is very much alive, seems distant or non-existent. Even faith seems an absurdity on such a lonely path. Finally, you have three choices. You can press on with your own resources. You can be defiant, but that will unlikely win the day because it's too full of personal agendas or, if defiance wins the day it will surely lose the war. Or, you can surrender. This is where the tide turns. Where the disciples encountered the risen Christ (at least those who were willing to continue).

\*When we come empty, willing to be taken over, when we are willing to step into no little personal death, that is when resurrection comes alive. Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "The resurrection was not so much about Jesus as it was about his followers. It was not so much an event in *his* history as it was an event in *theirs*."

A couple of days ago Howard Friend pointed out to me that if, when the women ran away in fear and trembling, they never told anyone, the story ends...! No community of faith is born. The spiritual gene of the line runs cold and dies. But they did tell someone, they must have. Even if we did not have the other gospels concurrence, clearly these women experienced some powerful experience of the resurrected Lord that compelled them in joy and exhilaration to share the news—news that was so palpable and real that it spread like wildfire, not as information but living proof. Jesus was alive! Mark ends here because he is compelled by his own experience to make the point that *everything* depends on us. If we do not claim the resurrection as our own, and pass it on, it dies with us. We cannot trust someone else to do it for us. The very reason that parents are the pivotal center of the ten commandments is that they must tell their children, as you must yours. But that's only a fraction of it. The resurrection never was about information: "Christ is risen!" So what, says the world with a shrug. It is about intimate self discovery of a real transforming power, which we must pass on. Not to, is like having children then spiritually abandoning them.

I am a reasoning being. But whenever reason seems laughable in the stress of the moment, and I plead from empty hands and soul, God seems to say, "Now I can help you. Now you give me space to breathe in you." As one writer puts it, Mark's gospel ends not by recording that the disciples saw Jesus and believed, but that if they believe—they will see him. If we trust, and ask *God* to lead us through the obstacles that stand in our way, we too shall see him. *We* have to finish the story for ourselves, experiencing Jesus. Don't we tell our children that in life. "I cannot do it for you," we say to them. "I can only tell you of my experience. But you have to make that journey, experience it for yourself."

Everyone who wishes to go the whole way to God, has to pass through a form of "death." The addict has to, the one who wishes to be reconciled to a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, has to. As Gail O'Day, a former professor of mine, writes, "It is God who raised Jesus; it is God who has altered the rules of the known world [in the resurrection]. . . . Silence [such as the women had] is not a failed or inadequate response. Silence is a wholly appropriate response, because the women's silence creates a space for the voice and presence of God to resound."

Our best prayers are often pure silence. The apostle Paul understood this. "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience [that is, in silence]. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:25-26). If you wish to ask God for something, but do not know what precisely to ask for, or how to form your thoughts—just be still where you are. God knows, understands, and cherishes the meaning of your silence. Let the Spirit do the praying for you. Then, as you seek to be faithful and attentive, *watch in wonder at what happens*. Celebrate those lovely resurrection intrusions, the guidance that slips like seamless thoughts among your own. Moments when the day feels uncommonly different, as though accompanied by a benevolent tenderness, a hopefulness and confidence. These, too, are fragments of resurrection promise, as a stone rolled away in anticipation of your coming. And they are addictive in the best way. How, do we imagine, have our brothers and

sisters in the faith, from the earliest Christian family until today, faced persecution unto death while keeping the faith? There is no Pollyanna blindness here. When prayer requests are not so much answered as revised, that, too, is the resurrection at work within you.

Prayer as silence invites God to speak God's own agenda. Then watch the day become like a litany of little graces. Watch how challenges to go deeper into some difficult task are mysteriously companioned with confidence. How the gift of courage comes with the commitment to the hard thing. How obstacles become pathways, service that was felt as obligation, even an obtrusion, becomes the soul's doxology (thanksgiving), and sacrifice becomes our, and another's empowerment.

These things are not my imagination. They are my *experience*, and that of many of you, I know. Ask around our fellowship, and you will find it true. Whenever we ask in faith, "Who shall roll the stone away for us?"—it is already done in God's eye.

The resurrection is a gift to us, a gift always to be given away like seed for the harvest that cannot stay in the hand. But when as Jesus promised, it is allowed to fall into the life of another, it bears much fruit (John 12:24). Herein is the secret of resurrection life. An example: the late Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, was gunned down while celebrating Mass in the cathedral shortly after writing this:

I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death—but in resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. As a pastor I am bound by divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that includes *all* Salvadorans, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.

That's resurrection! To God be the resurrection power and the glory.

A blessed Easter to you all.

Amen.