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Sermon for Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

Mark 16:1-8 – “Can You Roll Away the Stone?”

Grace and peace to you this Day from God our Loving Parent and from the One who rolls away the heavy stones of our lives, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. We are filming this Easter sermon outdoors because we decided in our Easter worship planning that outdoors should be our main focus this year, our 2nd Easter in a row in pandemic. After all, the women of today’s Gospel set out into the new day to be the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and also, there is a long tradition of outdoor Easter worship, although typically at Sunrise – and so our Easter this year is going to lean into that (without strictly adhering to the sunrise part)!

Although I must say, for you particular Easter worshippers participating from home, your experience flows out of a more recent worship strand – what has come to be known in the tradition as virtual or Zoom Watch Party or YouTube. No matter how you have come to join our Easter worship this year, you are like the three women of our Gospel text, Mary, Mary

and Salome, coming out early on the first day of the week. And, if you participated in Holy Week, if you've been waiting out pandemic, or if it simply is your time for tragedy to find you, if you've been holding your breath through death and dismay, maybe more than any other year, you can relate to the emotions of these three early-risers, on a mission, to see the last of the horrible through.

These three women are what remain after the Palm Sunday cheering, the pendulum swings of Maundy Thursday of gathering & betrayal, the jeering and deriding of Good Friday, and the yawning silence of Holy Saturday, These three women are the last of the last, heading out to anoint Jesus' body for burial, giving up on all prior hopeful plans – they are preparing to bury their own hopes and dreams alongside.

These women set out to do this holy human duty, the tending of the human body post-death. They set out early. The story feels heavy. It's like they're simply putting one foot in front of the other. The fog of death has descended, lifting only a little as the difficulty of their endeavor clarifies around one question,

they give voice to as they walk to Jesus' grave: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" Who's going to roll away that stone?

A surprising question really, for these women heading out to the tomb early that first Easter had, just two days before, seen the stone rolled over the face of what they thought would be Jesus' final resting place. They had seen the size of it, the Roman guard posted outside it. And now as they walked either silently, or in barely audible whispers, I imagine them stealing glances at one other, for not even the three of them together could move that stone (even if they dared do it). **But still the women walked on in darkness, into the abyss of the unknown, feeling the ache of failed dreams. Who could possibly roll this massive stone of death and despair away?**

Even though we might not phrase it exactly the same way, this is a question we all ask. When the shroud of death descends, when the hurt of failed relationship tests beyond what should be borne; when disease beyond all comprehension robs a year of our normal, when illness, addiction, or whatever that heavy

weight is, settles into your life, seemingly to stay, the question we ask is the same the women of Easter morn ask : “Who can roll the stone away?

Every time heaviness has fallen into my life, whether by coincidence, or as a natural byproduct of my own behaviors or bad decision-making, some form of this question gets asked, “Who can roll that stone away?” My first thought has often been, “I can,” even though absolutely no evidence exists that I’ve been able to pull it off in the past. The women in the Gospel story are better than that. They don’t presuppose that they, themselves, can move the tombstone. They know there are too many things in life too heavy to move – that are beyond our ability to move. I have been in rooms where those gathered would do anything to stop the death of the loved one slipping away before their eyes. I have seen marriages and parent/child relationships ripped apart by forces the parties seem unable to control. Not to mention the everyday, lingering, exhausting and unanswerable questions like why the innocent suffer, injustices linger, power corrupt. The list of

heavy things I cannot budge is too big. Who can roll the stone away?

Even when we join together, some of these things still won't budge. Or sometimes when we gather enough strength, or come together in unison, to move some heavy weight in life, we watch in horror as it tips in the wrong direction, or just gets even more stuck. Indeed, often our efforts at moving heavy things seem to roll back on us. Our moving a heavy load can tend sometimes to just shift its burden on another. If we cannot roll away the stone without causing more damage, who can?

Well, in the Gospel text, after worrying all the way to the tomb about how the stone would be moved, it says the women "looked up," and saw that the large stone "had already been moved back." "What's going on?" the women must have wondered. Who could blame them if the story ended right there, these last bold ones running away right there, the story ending with terror, but no amazement? Instead, they go in and find a heavenly herald who at least explains the "why" if not

the “how” of the stone had been rolled away. “Do not be alarmed,” the angel declares, this Jesus of Nazareth whose body you seek, he is not here, **he has been raised up**, and has gone out ahead of you.

Who can roll away the stone - the stone of Jesus’ tomb & the stones too many to count blocking the openings of our lives? Only one – God can. In moving this grave stone, the rules sin and suffering, injustice and death, we know only too well, get rewritten. True to this Resurrection account, it’s also equally true that even though these stones get moved, we don’t get all the answers as to how. Indeed, to the great events witnessed by the 3 women, the first witnesses to the resurrection, the Gospel writer Mark says they fled out of the tomb “for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” This is a pretty honest ending to the Gospel story by Mark. It’s not a pretty ending; and it certainly isn’t tidy. It doesn’t even say that the women went and told Peter or the disciples or anyone that they had seen the stone rolled back, even though we know they did do something

as we are still talking about and experience this for ourselves some 2,000 years later. Fear and amazement were their initial feelings. I'm sure it took more than a while to process it all.

But what these women received as a gift of faith, and what they could hold onto for a lifetime, was the experience - the experience of seeing that Death Stone rolled back. You see, the gift of faith in knowing that with God, all things are possible, even if we don't always grasp how.

Early or not, you Easter church-goers have ventured out. Like every other human being before, and everyone to follow, we are given our own opportunity to trust God with the heavy weights in our lives. Because Jesus both lived, and died, he knew what we know – the humanity in its fullness; mortality and its inattention to fairness, joy and its equally experienced counterpart, despair; but because the stone was rolled back and Jesus lifted up, we will also know the gifts of peace and love and life, lived not just for ourselves, but for the sake of the other.

I know it's a little scary, more than a little actually. Because living outside our comfort zones and expectations always is. We have spent a year watching stone after stone block our way. Bad news has become such a way of life we almost can't believe there can possibly be any good news on the horizon. But this day the stone rolls back. It is amazing and, yes, even more than a little terrifying, to be confronted with such a big truth. Easter is the divine offer that you see and sense and touch experience life in its fullness, death turned back around...for yourself. There is nothing virtual about it. He offers himself to and for you. And whether you run, shrug, quizzically stare, or fall on your knees, it really is of no matter. For you see, Jesus is risen; He is risen indeed. Amen.