

The Stone Is Rolled Away! **Easter, Year A – Matthew 28:1-10**

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 20, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Three members of an Episcopal parish – not St. Paul's, of course – three members of some other Episcopal parish died together in a terrible yachting accident and meet together at the pearly gates of heaven. St. Peter tells them they can enter the pearly gates only if they can answer one simple question. St. Peter's question: "What is Easter?"

The first Episcopalian – from some other parish, remember – the first member replies, "Oh, that's easy! It's the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and expresses their thankfulness for their many blessings." "Wrong!"

St. Peter turns to the second Episcopalian, and asks the same question: "What is Easter?" The second parishioner replies, "Easter is the holiday in December when we decorate a beautiful tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus." St. Peter looks at the second person as he bangs his head on a nearby bank of clouds. "No!"

Finally, he peers over his glasses at the third parishioner and asks, "Do you know what Easter is?" The third parishioner smiles confidently and looks St. Peter in the eyes, "Certainly I know what Easter is." "Oh?" Peter says incredulously, "Well, let's hear it then." Brimming with confidence, the last Episcopalian rebuttons his jacket and begins, "Easter is the Christian holiday associated with the Jewish celebration of Passover in the spring of the year. Jesus and his disciples ate their last supper together before they went to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples and turned over to the Romans. The Romans took him to be crucified and he was made to wear a crown of thorns, was hung on a cross with nails through his hands and feet, and was pierced in the side. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed with a large boulder."

St. Peter looks up from his ledger and smiles broadly with delight. "Wonderful! Go on, go on." The third parishioner beams at the approval, again rebuttons his jacket, and continues, "On the third day, the stone was rolled away and Jesus came forth... and if he sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter."

Alleluia, the Lord is risen! And your part: The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

It was still dark when the two women arose that morning, the first day of the week. Mary, sometimes called Magdalene, and the other Mary got up, put on their garments, grabbed the spices that had been standing in readiness since the beginning of the Sabbath, and stepped out onto the dirt road that led out of the city. As the first light of the coming dawn began to color the horizon, their path was lined with dark shadows. But darkness of night or shadow of danger could not compare with the dark shadows that haunted these two women's souls. As they made their way toward the tomb, thoughts and sights of the last week ripped through their minds like violent storms.

They had been there when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the colt of an ass, with hundreds, maybe thousands shouting his praise. But they were there as well when the shout of the crowds turned from, "Hosanna" to, "Crucify him!" They had seen Jesus tied to a post, a Roman scourge ripping across His back. They had seen him "crowned" with thorns and draped in purple to turn to mockery his talk of the presence of the Kingdom of God. They had been there when their teacher, their friend, their Lord had been stripped and spit upon and nailed to the rough, hard wood of a cross. When others had fled, these women had stood at Jesus' feet for the hours he hung on the cross. They were there when Jesus committed his soul to his Father. And they were there when he breathed his last.

They were there the day Jesus died, and they died that day too. Their dreams, their joy, their hope died with their Christ on Golgotha's cross. All that was left was their love for him... and their duty. Someone had to prepare the body for burial. Someone had to clean the body, wipe the blood from his

battered brow, his beaten back, his pierced side. Someone had to anoint him with myrrh and with cassia and with aloes. Someone had to be the last to see him. Someone had to be the last to close his eyes. Someone had to be the last to touch his face. And so, early on the day after the Sabbath, early on the third day after his death, as early as they possibly could, the women made their way to the tomb.

But as they approached the place where their friend had been lain that dark afternoon, they realized they had a problem. “Mary,” one said to the other, “who will roll away the stone?”

Well, you know the rest of the story, of course. If you didn’t before, you just heard it a moment ago. Earthquake. Dazzling bright angel rolls the stone away. Guards scared to death. “He’s not here; for he has risen, as he said.” The risen Christ himself greets them on the way. “Go tell the disciples I will see them.” Resurrection!

It’s a familiar story. We’ve heard this story again and again – even those of us that the preacher gets only a couple of chances at a year. But in all the times you’ve heard the story, have you ever wondered, why was the stone was rolled away at all?

Why was the stone rolled away? After all, the angel didn’t need the stone rolled away. The upended stone apparently ended up serving as a chaise lounge of sorts, but the angel could have just delivered his Good News standing, or in some other, equally brilliant posture.

Jesus didn’t need the stone rolled away. Other parts of the story say that the act of his resurrection happened straight through the cloth with which he had been bound. A sealed tomb was certainly no greater obstacle.

The Father certainly didn’t need the stone rolled away. The one who spoke creation into being by a singular act of will – “Let there be light. And there was light.” – the Father could just as easily have accomplished his purposes without moving any rubble about.

To be sure, the stone being rolled away was not only unnecessary, but decidedly inconvenient for the governor and the religious authorities. And it was a real pain for a certain detachment of guards. Certainly none of them needed that stone rolled away.

As the two women worriedly, dejectedly, perhaps even fearfully made their way to the tomb early that first Sunday morning, it occurred to them that if they were going to minister to Jesus, if they were going to hold Jesus, if they were going to see Jesus, then the stone needed to be rolled away.

Don’t you see? The stone was rolled away for them. The stone was rolled away so that someone could see that the tomb where they expected to find their friend, their companion, their savior, was empty. The stone was rolled away so that they could see that, “He is not here; for he has risen, as he said.” No, that’s not quite right. The stone was rolled away so that two women could be witnesses to others that, “He is not here; for he has risen.” No, the stone was rolled away so that Mary (sometimes called Magdalene) and the other Mary could be part of the story we hear and tell again this morning, so that they would be part of the story of the redemption and salvation of the world, so that Mary and Mary could and would be part of the Good News that, “He is not here; for he has risen.”

You see, dear friends, part of what we mean when we talk about God at all, is that God does not need anything to be God. But from the beginning, when God spoke all creation into being, when God spoke us into being, from the very beginning, God made us part of the story. In the ark through the flood, walking through the Red Sea on dry land, coming home to the Promised Land, in the lions’ den and in the fiery furnace and in the fish’s belly, God made us part of the story. Through the Law, and through the prophets, God made us part of the story. Through all the parts of the story that we hear on all those other Sundays besides Christmas and Easter, God made us, all of us, part of the story. The stone was rolled away for no other reason than that generations and centuries and literally an eternity of us-es can and will be part of the story of God’s totally unnecessary, totally unreasonable, and totally... total love... for us.

I hope I’ve made that clear enough, especially for those for whom I only get a couple shots in fifty. I hope we’ve managed to distinguish the story of Easter from carving our turkey, trimming our tree, or seeing our shadow. I hope you heard the Good News of this and every Sunday – that the Lord of Heaven wants you to be part of the story that makes the whole universe sing.

Alleluia, the Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!