

Who Will Roll Away the Stone?

Mark 16: 1-8

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Kyle Childress

We know what to do when someone dies. We say goodbye. We grieve and go on with our lives as best as we can. We pay our respects and learn to go on.

That is all Mary Magdalene and the other women were doing that morning – grieving and paying their respects. Going to the tomb to say goodbye and do their religious duty by anointing the body with spices and oils, since the authorities had not allowed it earlier. The last few days and nights seemed to all have run together. No sleep; too much going on; too much worry. Emotions stretched to the breaking point. Terror over possible arrest, torture, and death. Seeing their own beloved Jesus tortured and executed on a cross. Overwhelming grief. Shock. All hope crushed.

As they approach the cemetery, they realize they can't even get to Jesus' body to pay proper respects and to fulfill religious duty. The way is blocked by a huge boulder which seals the tomb shut. Everywhere is yellow police tape saying, "Do not cross." Right in the middle of the path, one woman just stops and starts crying in grief but also in frustration and anger, "Who will roll away the stone?!" The other two look at her in bewilderment before their shoulders sag and they too begin to cry with tears from deep down inside. This is the kind of crying that comes from a lifetime of disappointments, doors slammed in your face, false hopes and empty promises. Sometimes you can't take it anymore.

We had hoped that being Christian had more to it than this. We had dreamed of changing the world, or at least, Nacogdoches. Now we are doing good just to make it through Tuesday. We're in two wars and on the edge of another one. Every day we go without rain we're wondering about climate change while Austin and Washington have their heads in the sand. Each day we have a growing sense of helplessness with set-back after set-back. Every day we hear of someone else with cancer; we can't find jobs or we're stuck in dead-end ones or we know friends who are. Taxes are cut for the wealthy while the burdens on poor and working people are compounded. Due to unregulated and unmitigated greed Wall Street almost destroys the world's economy and not only does no one go to jail, many of the big banks have gotten richer off of it.

Dorothy Day, the great Catholic lay-woman who worked with the poor and homeless said, "We must try to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for people to be good." I fear that we're making a society in which it is easier for people to be bad. Any day I expect to hear of someone in the legislature in Austin introducing a bill saying that greed is good, shoot-outs on the streets are legal, robbing poor people is commended, and that the earth is flat.

We've been resigned to lower expectations but we never we thought it would get this low. And now this ... we simply want to pay our respects to the One in whom we had hoped. We just want to anoint his body. But there's a stone too big to budge blocking our way.

We want to be a disciple, be a church that amounts to something, makes a difference, and we've been willing to swim against the stream but, my heavens, it seems that the stream we swim against is an onrushing flood. We are tired, weary, worn down – and then someone seals the tomb shut!

That stone is everything that keeps us from being the disciples, the persons, the church that God has called us to be. Whatever it is that paralyzes us and makes us reluctantly conclude that we are in a place that we cannot get out of and that God cannot or will not help us. We can't move the stone. It is too much for us.

It is not just that the Powers and Principalities killed Jesus, they sealed the tomb in a way where we have no dignity, no hope, and no doubt that they have the power to do whatever they wish and there is not one thing, not one thing we can do to stop them. They have the power and we don't. And when they seal the tomb, it says "By order of the People and Senate of Rome." When Rome seals it; it stays sealed.

One thing about Mark's Easter story, he faces our condition squarely, refusing to let us off easy or rescue us with some syrupy sugar-coating. Mark's story of these women before the stone gives us empathy. Yet, if that is all Mark offered, it could hardly be called good news. If that is all Mark has to tell us, then enough bad news, I have other things to do.

So along with Mark's straight talk, he talks to us about *grace*. Mark says, "When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back." A better translation says, "They looked again and saw that the stone had been rolled away."

This is *not* natural. This is not what we expected. We, like those women, have learned to not expect much, so we won't be disappointed much. Indeed, some of us have grown cynical! Stones don't get rolled away! It just does not happen in the real world!

But this one does! Not by our efforts. Not by our technology and not by our working harder! This stone is removed by the One beyond us, the One who comes from outside of this natural order – radically free yet bound to us in love.

W. H. Auden said, “Nothing that is possible can save us. We who die demand a miracle.”

Nothing we can do can move this stone. It has already been rolled away. We need only to have the eyes to see it.

Mark says, “They looked again.” “To look again” is a word Mark uses to mean a faith that looks more deeply into what appears to be in order to see what is really is. We might translate it literally: “to re-vision.” Growing as a Christian has very much to do with learning to look again at this world; to learn to see where God is working.

And then Mark says that a messenger in white said, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here. He is risen!”

This Jesus cannot be contained by heavy stones or domesticated by our low expectations or controlled by the official seals of the Empires. Christ breaks free of all we try to bind him with. He does not follow us on our agenda or according to our understanding or in terms acceptable to what is popular. We follow him; we learn his agenda, learn to understand his Way, popular or not.

The Resurrected life is scary. It is unnatural. To expect a huge stone and a dead end and instead find an empty tomb and a newly resurrected Christ in our future – well, it’s not natural.

Death is natural. Loss is natural. Grief is natural. The Powerful winning is natural. But to have the stone rolled away reveals to us the highly unnatural truth

of the ways of God. God will not give up on us. God will not give up on justice. God will not give up on making this old, violence-filled world new – not even the death of his Son will stop God. God is determined to do a new thing even right here with us.

Janet Morley, a Methodist minister in England, said it this way: *When we are all despairing; when the world is full of grief; when we see no way ahead, and hope has gone away: (what do we say?)Roll away the stone!*

Although we fear change; although we're not ready; although we'd rather weep and run away:(what do we say?)Roll away the stone!

Because we're coming with the women; Because we hope where hope is vain; Because God calls us from the grave And shows us the way;(what do we say?)Roll away the stone!

What do we say? (“Roll away the stone!”) What do we say? (“Roll away the stone!”) What do we say? (“Roll away the stone!”)

Now let the “Alleluias” begin! Amen and amen.