

Easter 2015 Sermon

Who Will Roll Away The Stone?

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Taking a long walk can be good for your health. If there's something troubling you, a long walk gives you the chance to work things through.

The Gospeller Mark tells us that three women started out on a long walk on that first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome were on their way to finish the burial of Jesus that had been started hastily the day before. The walk would have been over a couple of miles and perhaps as much as five miles. It might have taken over an hour to go from a starting point in Jerusalem to the tomb of Joseph of Arimethea, which was the place where Jesus's body had been laid the day before. We can imagine them walking to the southern outskirts of Jerusalem and then trekking along the city's border to the Valley of Hinnom, stopping where that valley intersects with the Kidron Valley.

Along the way, they had time to work out the things they needed to work out. Maybe they took inventory of the things they had brought to finish Jesus's burial: spices, check; baskets, check; they had brought all the materials they needed. Since they loved Jesus, they also brought their own treasures, their tears and the kind of fidelity that keeps faithfulness even beyond death. Along that long walk, they also had the time to identify the things they could not work out for themselves: big questions, like, What shall we do now he is gone? and practical questions like, how will we ever move that stone from the entrance of his tomb? Who will roll away the stone?

It reminds me of another time, a long time previous, when another set of three people were on a long walk at the outskirts of Jerusalem. On that occasion, it was not three women but a man and a woman and an infant still in the womb who walked the outer precincts of the ancient City of David. They were looking for a place to stay overnight on a night when there seemed to be no available lodging, nowhere to lay their heads. Interestingly, the place where Joseph and Mary found to lodge was a cut-out in the rock face, a sheltered place suitable for livestock but little else. So also was the tomb of Jesus cut out from the rockface: only where once there was a manger cradling an infant King, now there was a tomb for a dead King.

Just as we can imagine, on the night of Jesus's birth, a few arguments between Joseph and Mary -- where on earth will we be able to find shelter? how long will we have to stay there? what will we do? So also, we can almost hear the worrying of the three women: "What will we do when we get to the tomb? How in the world will we roll back the stone that covers the entrance?"

The problem is glossed over in the version of the story from John's gospel, which simply says "The stone had been removed from the tomb." But in the parallel from Mark's gospel, the language is direct and simple: the problem is acute: "Who will roll away the stone for us?"

In this simple question lies our struggle with faith, two millenia later.

We have an innate sense that there is work to be done to be saved. Or, to put it differently, to be accepted by God, we feel we must have to make some gargantuan effort. We need the consolation of some kind of cleansing effort or ritual act by which we can feel that we are made clean. We feel our imperfection too intensely: we can easily think of the things that we should have done that we have not done, or the things that we have done that we should not have done. Without much prompting at all, we can think of the ways we have caused harm to others, intentionally or not. The times we have hurt people intentionally at least we can feel better about having the responsibility and ability to act rightly. But those times we have hurt people unintentionally are often the worst -- because we don't feel ourselves to be in control of the factors that caused the harm. Face to face with our lack of control and our human frailty, we feel the need to be set aright. Yet the distance seems so vast between our frailty and perfection. Surely, it would take some massive effort to get from here to there.

And so, we identify with the women's question, "Who will roll away the stone for us." We know we cannot roll it away by our own effort.

Yet, that doesn't stop us from trying. Perhaps it's simply human nature to assume that one must do it for oneself. What's that warped proverb? If you want something done right, you must do it yourself. And yet, when it comes to our salvation, our being eternally accepted and loved by God, what an idiotic proverb, so clearly untrue. I cannot do my salvation right. You cannot do your salvation right.

And yet we default to trying. If we're honest we find little trip-wires in our thinking, trip-wires that are noticeable when we examine our speech and thinking. We say things like: It comforts me to come to church because it's God's house. How is it that your house is not God's house? Could it be that God, who is everywhere, is not capable of being in your house? How could that be!? Here's another example: I offer back to God a portion of my time and my treasure. Sounds good at first. But how is it possible that they are my time and my treasure? Isn't it the case that all we are and all we have comes from the Lord of heaven and earth? Isn't it all God's treasure? Such comments reveal how distorted our thinking is, that we so easily segregate God into a little ghetto and deceive ourselves that we are responsible for everything that happens outside of church and that God is responsible for what happens inside the church.

Today is Easter, and Easter Day is the day for getting rid of self-deception and distortion. Our effort cannot roll away the stone. Our effort cannot justify us. Our effort cannot remove our sin. Our effort cannot make us guiltless. Our effort cannot pardon us so that we are not condemned on the Day of Judgement. Our effort cannot transform us from being creatures of clay to beings eternal. Our effort cannot, but God's can. And God has. God has rolled away the stone, raising Jesus and us from the tomb.

But there's still an important part for us to do. It turns out that our first instinct, that we need to do something, is the right instinct. What we have to do, however, is not to save ourselves, but to act like who we are, to act like the redeemed people we are. We are forgiven, so act like forgiven people, not people who are enslaved to old bad habits and destructive obsessions and addictions. We are redeemed, so act like it: do not allow unconstructive guilt and unproductive self-criticism to distort your self-image as a redeemed child of God. We are free people, so make decisions that bespeak your freedom in Christ and do not give in to the malaise and cynicism of this age. God has done the heavy lifting, but it is our labor to live into the freedom God has secured for us.

Living into the freedom God has given us means living every day as a relationship with the living God instead of sticking him back in the tomb. In other words, talk to God -- not just in your prayers but in your between-moments when you're waiting for the gas tank of your car to be filled, or peeling the carrots, or waiting for your next appointment. And prepare your heart to receive the love and acceptance of God. Too many times we have the picture of God as some critical, irate parent. Get rid of it; that's not a useful image. Jesus didn't suffer through the crucifixion for you to criticize yourself to death. Jesus offered himself to demonstrate that God will stop at nothing to show his love for you.

Our instincts are correct: there is a huge effort demanded of us. But the effort is not to roll away the stone but to re-train ourselves to claim the benefits of one for whom the stone has been rolled away. Put the effort you would have put into the stone into loving yourself as God loves you. When you take a long walk and start to worry -- about how it is that God can love you this much; about whether you can be sure that God loves you? about whether perhaps God meant everybody but you -- when you start to worry, deliberately stop yourself. The stone has been rolled away, and you are standing at the entrance of love. Allow yourself to walk into that place God has prepared for you; that place where God waits for you, to receive you as daughter or son. Walk into love.