

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Easter 2023

Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Theme: Rolling back the Rock

Preacher: Christopher McLaren

It is early on the third day. The two Marys make their way to the tomb after the Sabbath. They come at first light, anxious about what they will find. In a way it is the completion of their vigil. They have been with Jesus every step of the way: "looking on from a distance," when Jesus was crucified and they sitting in front of the tomb when Joseph of Arimathea buried him and set the stone in place. Of all of Jesus' followers they have been faithful, refusing to abandon him in his hour of death and burial. Now they have come once again to be close to their beloved, to visit his grave and mourn. It seems natural to visit the grave of one's beloved friend, to try to be close to them even though they are gone.

"Suddenly there was a great earthquake." The earth shakes and the tremors stretch their fingers underground. This is a cosmic mystery complete with a messenger who is like lightning and bright as whitest snow. It is a wild scene, this fearsome angel of light answers one of the questions on the women's minds with a powerful and awesome gesture, rolling back the stone from the entrance to the tomb and playfully perching atop the stone. In one fell swoop the tomb of death becomes the throne of God.

Fear grips the women. If death inspires fear, then what else can a God who is stronger than death inspire? The barrier that separated Jesus from his disciples and friends has been rolled back. Those meant to keep Jesus dead and in the tomb, comically become like dead men themselves by holy terror.

“But the angel,” yes the angel of the Lord, has much to tell the women come to the tomb of their beloved. “Do not be afraid;” what beautiful and challenging words these are, the words they most need to hear, the words everyone facing death needs to hear, the words we need to hear deep in our own hearts. The angel keeps the women from becoming paralyzed like the guards, his voice drawing them out of their terror. The angel knows their quest and lets them know that the power of heaven is at their service.

The women are looking for “Jesus who was crucified,” but the tomb cannot hold him. The angel or the Lord invites the women to look inside the tomb, to see the place where he lay. He is no longer in the tomb. That is the old news. The new news is something far more wonderful, staggering and beyond their wildest dreams. “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

Galilee, the place they met and became followers of this beautiful and challenging man, the of Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing. Galilee was home and if Jesus’ mission was to continue, it made perfect sense that it would be there. Jesus is going there ahead of them and will be where his

mission is and where his friends will gather. What looked like the end is a beginning, death may be a change of forms, but for Jesus it is not the end of the life and mission and joy.

The women leave the tomb “quickly with fear and great joy,” If I were a painter, this is the moment I would like to paint. The two Marys’ faces in the early morning light as they run for home, run to tell the news, not of a crucified Jesus putrefying in the tomb but of a risen Lord going ahead of them to Galilee. I would like to capture the look on their faces of joy, holy fear, and unbelievable news as their faces gleam in the morning light, their hair flowing behind them as they hurry with hearts full of wonder.

As they rush away, the women meet Jesus, whose presence abruptly ends their sprint homeward. The women have believed the message of the angel and acted on that good news and therefore they meet the Risen One. The words of Jesus are gracious and reassuring. Their friend and the one who is God’s beloved is with them again. They fall to his feet in worship. They grasp his feet, his resurrected body can be touched. Jesus reminds them of their journey, sends them to “his brothers” and tells them he will see them in Galilee. He has not disappeared into death nor into God. He is with his disciples, doing the work he was sent to do, to draw all people into the love of God, to undo the powers of death that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

There is something powerful about this story, this rolling back the stone that keeps us from seeing the Risen Christ. For some

here today this story is a beautiful affirmation of something we desire to believe in the deepest parts of our life, that death is not the end, that God is stronger than death. That in Jesus the power of God has been revealed as undoing death and making a way where we thought there was no way. In Jesus, God has opened up a space in our world where God can be with us in the darkest of moments, in the most desperate of circumstances, and the most awful suffering. If this story tells us anything, it tells us that God is not only able but desires to be with us in most troubling of times, in the most fearful parts of our life, in the darkest of moments. That God loved and continues to love humanity so much that God was willing to suffer and die in the midst of humanity to make space for God in our lives, to make a way into our presence.

Sometimes we actually believe this powerful story of resurrection and sometimes the stone remains rolled against the entrance to the tomb. What we most need is to have the stone rolled back from our own hearts so that we can peer into the empty tomb and hear the message of the angel, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed is going ahead of you." In the darkness of the world around us, in the unimaginable suffering we hear about every day, in the midst of the crises of our own country, our own state, our own lives we need to hear a message of resurrection, of hope that we are not alone, of life that overcomes fear and redoubles on itself. Who will roll the back the stone? How will we catch a vision of the risen Christ, going ahead of us, meeting us on the road, reassuring us that the end is life, not death?

Sometimes story does it best.

The teacher decided that during the first three days of Holy Week the eighth-grade class would put on a passion play. There would be six performances with different grades attending each performance. In this way the eighth graders would learn the passion according to St. Matthew and so would the entire school.

It seemed like a good idea.

As often happens with good ideas, there were a few snags. There were more eighth graders than there were parts in the passion play or the need for stage hands, set designers, etc. So the teacher succumbed to another good idea – to move in the direction of imaginative, avant-garde theatre. She cast every animate and inanimate reference in the Gospel of Matthew's story.

She cast:

The tree from which Judas hanged himself.

The broken vase of perfume

Five people simulating an earthquake

Three people doing a credible job of imitating 30 pieces of silver clattering over the temple floor

Bystanders

More bystanders

Still more bystanders

She also cast the rock that blocked the entrance to the tomb of Jesus. This was not a difficult task. In fact, it was blatant typecasting. There was a boy who had, as his mother put it, “sprouted early.” He was also, when he was on his knees and bent over with hands clasping his ankles, a perfect boulder.

“John, the teacher said, “You will be the rock- the one blocking the tomb, not the apostle Peter. (Teachers cannot avoid puns, especially when they are teaching religion.)

For the Angel of the Lord, who pushes the rock aside, she chose the most petite girl in the class – Tinker Bell one size up. The contrast, the teacher felt was positively biblical.

The first performance was for the third grade. The play was moving along with the predictable sniggers and laughs until the Angel of the Lord appeared. With her little finger outstretched, she nudged the rolled up rock. He somersaulted away from the entrance of the tomb while at the same time managing to stay rolled up. Then the angel of the Lord sat on him, making the stone of death the throne of the Lord – just as it says in the Gospel of Matthew.

The audience went wild. They cheered and chanted, “Rock! Rock! Rock!” Afterwards they swarmed him for autographs. He modestly signed them “Rock.” This happened at performance after performance.

Thus, a star was born.

Also, a critic. The teacher was not sure all this attention was good for the Rock. Perhaps the glory should be shared. She took the Rock aside and suggested that he play the tree from which Judas hangs himself. Someone else should have a chance at being the rock. The Rock said he did not think that was a good idea. "I like being the rock," he said.

**The teacher responded (with what she later thought was the best question of her career), "Why?"**

"I like letting Christ out of the tomb," the Rock said.

"But John, the rock isn't rolled back so Christ can get out of the tomb. He is already gone." (Teachers are always quick to correct). "The rock," she pointed out, "is rolled back so that the women can see in."

The Rock's face twisted as he floundered for the first time in the deep waters of the spirit. "Well," he said, "how did he get out if the rock was still stuck in the hole?"

This is the type of question all teachers fear: There is an answer, but it is light-years beyond what the questioner is able to handle. The teacher remained silent, searching for words. But the Rock found the words before the teacher did.

**"Well," he said, "I guess huge rocks are no big thing for God."**

**Thus did the Rock roll back the boulder from his own mind and see into the empty darkness of the Easter revelation.**

The teacher said in a quiet, choking voice that he should continue in the role of the rock, since he knew the part so well.

May the rock of our own minds and hearts be rolled back in this same way that we too might see the empty tomb and know the deep mystery of God's love ourselves, for Christ is risen! And the tomb is empty. Alleluia, Christ is Risen.