

A Sermon Delivered by  
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.  
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church  
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Easter Day  
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*Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb? (Mark 16:3)*

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

**The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

This is a joyous day and I greet you this morning with marvelous news. “The strife is o’er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun.” So it is that we sing with a sense of gladness and joy in our hearts this Easter season. Yet that acclamation of joy from our perspective as modern-day Christians living as citizens in the midst of a new world order, is very different from what may actually have occurred amongst the followers of Jesus on that first Easter Day. Looking back over 2000 years to the events surrounding that initial resurrection raises numerous questions and poses several challenges to belief.

What must it have been like, for example, to the women of the time; Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome; who were en route to the grave so they might anoint Jesus’ body in the sepulcher, as was the custom of their day? What was going on with them? More than likely they wondered, and questioned in very practical terms, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” We can only imagine it must have been very heavy, and quite large. Who would be available to lend a hand? Real questions.

Well, you know the story. When the women got there, they found the stone was already rolled way, and they were met by a young man dressed in a white robe stating: “you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, but he is not here, he has been raised.” And then, what arguably was the first Mission Statement of the church ever conceived, the women were instructed to ‘go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, and there you will see him.’ As the first evangelists

and believers in Christ, they were given a specific mission to accomplish.

And like many of us confronting a life-changing event, where we often withdraw initially and cringe with fear and trepidation, the Gospel reports that the women did that very same thing. Mark says they “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they were afraid.” That’s quite a bit different from the euphoria and joy that many Christians experience today, at this very moment – even as I speak.

So it’s abundantly clear; in fact I think it’s fair to say that right from the beginning, we see contrasts emerging and differences of understanding developing in response to this resurrection. What really happened that day? What took place, and when exactly did it occur? All good questions, but who knows?

Well God knows, of course, but the truth is the rest of humankind has had to figure it out and make sense of what this wondrous event means from generation to generation. And over the years countless interpretations have ranged from brilliant to unthinkable, from orthodox to post-modern, and from the sublime to the ridiculous. Yet at the proverbial “end of the day,” each of us has to make up our own mind based on our experience, our understanding, and the degree of faith that we bring to the resurrection story. We need to do that individually.

But we also need to do that collectively in the wider context of being baptized members in the body of Christ. We say the creeds together, not entirely by ourselves; and when we do that corporately it grounds us in our personal convictions and beliefs and sustains us as well in the wider fellowship of faith. That faith is then continually renewed through the mediation of God, the ministry of the Church, and our individual lives of service – by focusing on the resurrection.

As the Nicene Creed states: *...For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

A brief historical review might be helpful here. Easter has changed dramatically over the years in different times and places. The resurrection of

Christ of course remains the same, yet the way Christians worship on the Lord's Day, which is what Easter was originally called, has varied considerably. At first, Christians worshiped with a simple meal to reenact the Lord's Supper, and to recall the amazing triumph of the risen Christ. That is still the core of our liturgy, even though the more formal aspects of how different denominations and communities-of-faith memorialize that meal is highly stylized and differentiated throughout the world.

We should also note in passing that until the year 325, Easter was celebrated mostly in conjunction with Passover, the Jewish festival. At the Council of Nicea, however, the church leaders who gathered there agreed that Easter should always be observed on a Sunday, thus giving birth to the pattern of every Sunday celebration being an Easter Feast. And historically it wasn't until the mid-fourth century that the Great Fifty Days developed in the church calendar. This was a time stretching from Easter Sunday all the way to Pentecost, a full seven weeks, rounded off to 50 days, where the reality, joy and meaning of the resurrection was observed. During that time the word "Alleluia" was returned to the liturgy, and the well-known versicle-response was regularly proclaimed.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

**The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

It's also true Biblically that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection differ somewhat according to the emphasis that each school of thought places on the meaning of what occurred, but one piece of the Easter narrative always seems to stand out – the stone is rolled away - or more accurately in the case of Mark's Gospel, the need is present for the stone to be rolled away from the entrance to the tomb; because the tomb is where we keep dead things. And that leads me to share some concluding remarks.

What are the stones in your life that need to be rolled away this Easter? One thoughtful writer put it this way:

*Sometimes we may realize that our own emptiness has been sealed by a stone, which may be intangible but very real.*

*-The stone can be our fear, or concern for self-protection, or our unwillingness to give.*

*-The stone can be our holding on to what needs to be let go, or our*

*reluctance to accept the gifts that we've been given.*

*-The stone can be an excess of caution that prevents us from embracing an unknown future.*

*-The stone can be guilt or disappointment, or a sense of inadequacy or shame.*

*-The stone can be the very fear of risking life that keeps us from living.*

*-The stone is our own darkness, the dry and brittle part of us that holds back from life.*

*Our lives will be frustrating if we remain trapped behind the stone of these discouragements.*

True enough!

But here's the good news - in the resurrection of Christ the stone is rolled away forever, and we are left to acclaim, "He is risen." Christ's resurrection sets us free for new life, new hope, and new glory. In fact Christ's resurrection is the very "means of grace and the hope of glory." We share in his victory over sin and death, we breathe fresh air and see the light, and most importantly we discover a glimpse of eternity. In the final analysis, God, however you choose to interpret or define the action, ...God has rolled away the stone for each of us.

Thanks be to God who has given us the victory in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

**The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

Kimberlee Conway Ireton, *The Circle of Seasons*. Intervarsity Press, 2008

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