

“Who Will Roll the Stone”

Mark 16.1–8

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Easter 2006

During the season of Lent, I led a study of a new book by Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan called *The Last Week*. The authors use **only** Mark’s story of the week between Palm Sunday and Easter. We usually get the mix-and-match approach with a bit of Mark, a chunk of Matthew, a smidgen of Luke, and a whole lot of John. Mark’s gospel is, of course, the earliest in the New Testament, and it’s fascinating just to read his account on its own, because this is the first known literary interpretation of the story of Jesus. This is the story you’d have had at your disposal if you were, say, a Christian in Syria in the year 75.

This may be news to you, but Mark was not a Hollywood screenwriter...or even a Victorian novelist. Mark’s story abruptly ends...just like you heard it: “They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That’s it. Full stop. ¡Adios!

In subsequent centuries, two separate editors added their own endings to the gospel, wrapping things up more tidily, concluding, manufacturing a denouement on Mark’s behalf.

But Mark leaves us with an empty tomb and scared, silent witnesses. *That’s a bit unsettling, isn’t it?* It makes us uncomfortable. Having read the other gospel accounts and Paul’s experience of the risen Christ, we want a bodily resurrection, a spiritual resurrection...**something!** Why? We want a conclusive ending, but that isn’t what we get...because there is no ending to the story: we each have to write our own.

John’s gospel provides the wonderful images that we often relate to: being a critical thinker like Thomas, who needs the empirical evidence yielded by poking his fingers in Jesus’ wounded hands, in order to grasp that Jesus is physically present. And the two dejected followers who are walking on the road to Emmaus, who fail to recognize Jesus as he walks alongside them, but who is made known to them in the breaking of the bread. *But all Mark leaves us with is an empty tomb.*

So, what conclusion will **you** write for Mark’s gospel?

Paul writes that like the hull of a seed, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”¹ And that he himself “dies every day”² only to be raised again and again to new life.

In what ways has the risen Christ been present to you? How have you died to an old way of thinking or living only to discover new life? Have you encountered transformation in the midst of your everyday life? **The story of resurrection is not over!** It’s an ongoing drama; **your** life is the stage, and **you** are the actors.



Going back to the story, did you notice what happened to the disciples – “the Twelve” – in this narrative? They’re long gone; they’ve fled. Joseph of Arimathea provides the tomb, secures Jesus’ body from Pilate, takes Jesus’ body down from the cross, wraps his body in a linen shroud, entombs Jesus, and rolls the great stone to seal the tomb.

Aside from Joseph – who is not a disciple, but a member of the council – it is the women who are the central characters in this narrative. It is they who demonstrate their faithfulness by staying near Jesus every step of the way. While one of the Twelve betrays Jesus, another denies him, and the rest desert him, the women stay the course. As Sharon

¹ 1 Corinthians. 15.35

² 1 Corinthians 15.31

alluded to in her sermon last Sunday, it is the crowd or the Twelve we're meant to follow, it is Jesus and the women.

Imagine for a moment being one of those women, what they witnessed on Good Friday. Imagine your intense grief on the following day, the Sabbath: when you could only make plans to return to the tomb and anoint Jesus' body with aromatic spices. This isn't a pleasant task. If Jesus had died 36 hours earlier, you would expect some decomposition would already have taken place, hence the aromatic herbs.

So, you gather the spices and set out for the tomb early Sunday morning. You steel yourself for the final act of devotion and honor, to anoint Jesus' body. The sun is rising as you walk with two other women toward the tomb. And then you have an awful realization: you won't be able to get in. The tomb is sealed with a very large stone, and you ask your companions, "Who will roll the stone away for us?"

Let's assume for a moment that it wasn't a grave robber who rolled the stone away, but rather the "young man dressed in a white robe." Is he an angel (or is he clergy)? Let's assume for a moment that he isn't a minister or priest wearing vestments. If he's an angel with superhuman ability, it's no big deal to roll away stone. But Mark says **nothing** about him being anything other than a human. "A young man" does not necessarily an angel make. Mark uses the Greek word, *neaniskos* (young man), while elsewhere in the gospel, he uses the word *angelos* to describe a messenger of God. Mark leaves it up for us to determine who the young man was: for many of us *have* entertained angels unawares. And some of us have been messengers of God without even knowing it.

What if **you** were approaching the tomb: who would move the stone for you?

Sometimes, we need someone to help roll the stone way so that we can experience the risen Christ. And at other times – those times when nobody else show ups – we ourselves can help roll the stone away for others. Like that young man in the white robe, who contrasts the mourning all around him, we can be a voice of hope, saying, "He has been raised; he is not here."



You've probably seen some big-time stone-rollers in your day: Gandhi, King, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and other international figures. Last Wednesday, the United Church lost one of its great stone-rollers, a man who once preached from this pulpit. William Sloane Coffin died at the age of 81. He was ordained as a Presbyterian and then came to the United Church of Christ. Some of you remember him preaching here at Plymouth. Others remember his opposition to the Vietnam War, or marching on Selma, or opening doors for gay and lesbian folk in the church and society. As senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City and chaplain at Battell Chapel at Yale, he stood tall and rolled away the stone of social injustice, introducing many to the shalom of the Risen One. Coffin once wrote, "The more we do God's will, the less unfinished business we leave behind when we die. If our lives exemplify personal charity and the pursuit of social justice, then death will not be the enemy, but rather the friendly angel leading us to the One whose highest hope is to be able to say to each and every one of us, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of the Master.'" We need stone-rollers to keep us going, so let us remember our brother, Bill Coffin.

Whether the world sees us as Nobel laureates or nobodies, by virtue of our baptism and our faith, we are called to roll away the stone for each other. Each of us has the capacity to show up for our fellow humans and help create a new beginning, a new insight, even a new life.

Will you pray with me?

Holy One, you have showed us once more that death is never your final word. Help us to be agents of your grace and messengers of your peace, that in rolling the stone away for others, we, too, might experience resurrection.

Amen.