

Still Rolling Stones Matthew 28:1-10

Resurrection of the Lord/ 21st April 2019

Only Matthew tells us *how* the stone was moved. Mark tells us that when the women arrived at the tomb the stone had already been rolled back (Mk. 16:4). Luke says the same (Lk. 24:3). Even John, who is usually a “horse of a different color,” agrees with both Mark and Luke (Jn. 20:1). Matthew is different. Matthew is far more dramatic. Matthew tells us that when the two Marys arrived at the tomb, it was still sealed. In fact, unique to Matthew, we’re told that Pilate stationed a guard of soldiers at the tomb, commanding them to, “. . . make it as secure as you can” (Mt. 27:65). So they made the tomb secure by sealing the stone (Mt. 27:66).

A sealed stone. That’s what the women found on the day after the Sabbath, at the dawn of a new week—which was also, they soon discovered, the dawn of the new eon of God’s grace and justice. For what they didn’t know was that something had *already* taken place behind that securely sealed stone.

Suddenly, the earth began to tremble and shake. I should say, shake *again*. Matthew tells us that when Jesus “cried with a loud voice and breathed his last” on the cross, “The earth shook, and the rocks were split” (Mt. 27:51). When the centurion and others standing at the cross saw (and felt) the earthquake, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mt. 27:54). And now we have another shaking. Not a tremor, but a full-blown earthquake. A “great earthquake,” caused this time, not by a death-blow, but by the arrival of a messenger from God who descends and then, single-handedly, almost effortlessly rolls back the stone—the previously secured stone. It’s the rolling of the stone that causes the earthquake, that triggers a geological upheaval, and that earthquake signifies and marks the seismic shift in consciousness the two Marys are about to experience, a revelation that will rock their world and shatter their reality and leave them bewildered and fearful—and erupting with joy.

And don’t you just love the image of the angel, dazzling bright, shining in all his glory, sitting up on the stone? I can see him jumping on the stone, sitting down, dusting off his hands, saying, “Well, there you go. All finished,” and crossing his arms with satisfaction and resting from his labor. And it’s from atop the stone that he looks down at the guards—who look up at him shaking in fear. They’re a pathetic bunch, assigned to what must surely be the unluckiest assignment in military history—making sure that Jesus stayed in the grave (Mt. 27:62-66). Don’t miss the small joke here at their expense. “Here they are on cemetery detail, . . . to guard a dead man who was supposed to stay that way, but when their charge turns out to have become suddenly very much alive, it is they who become candidates for the grave.”¹ Matthew says, “They became like dead men” (Mt. 28:4).

And did you notice that the angel offers no consolation to the guards? It’s only the women, who went to the tomb to be closer to Jesus, who hear, “Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay” (Mt. 28:5-6).

Come, see! The prison room of death is empty.² Come, see! Come, see resurrection! Come, see what resurrection can do! So, the angel then sends them, “Go and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him’” (Mt. 28:7). And then, quickly on their way, filled with “fear and great joy,” they meet the Resurrected One coming toward them, saying, *Χαίρετε*, (*Chairete*), “Greetings!” It also means, “Rejoice!” “Be glad!” “Be well!” Even, “Thrive.” It’s related to the Greek word for “joy,” *chara*; and “grace,” *charis*. Joy, grace meets them on the road.

In each of the Gospel accounts, but perhaps especially Matthew, we discover that resurrection is something other than the resuscitation of a corpse or body. When the women arrive at the tomb, the angel rolls back the stone to uncover or unveil to them what had *already* taken place: God had already raised Jesus. Jesus didn’t raise himself; it was God who raised him. It was God who reached into death and forced death to yield life. Jesus was given life because he was the object of God’s love, because that’s what God’s love does: *it brings life out of dead places*. Always. That’s what resurrection is. Resurrection is the life-giving power of God, it’s a force. With gracious intensity, strength, and might it enters godforsaken places and circumstances and people to transform and transfigure them and make all things new! This force has always been at work in the world, but supremely so in Jesus, the Christ, who says in the Apocalypse, “I am doing a new thing. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” (Rev. 21:5-6)!

That’s what the women at the tomb witnessed—resurrection results. The church has always been called to bear witness to this experience and possibility—to the power of resurrection. Even today. The eyes of the world were drawn this week to the tragic fire at Notre Dame in Paris. You’ve probably seen the photo taken inside the church the next day, on Tuesday morning, of the shining cross hanging above the rubble around the high altar. Some have called this a miracle. Perhaps. It was certainly an evocative image of hope. I read, however, that the reason the cross didn’t burn was because it never got hot enough in the nave for gold to melt. Personally, I think the three great rose windows surviving might be more miraculous. But what struck me most as I watched the roof go up in flames and saw the crowds, heard thousands of people, especially young people in Paris, singing hymns as they faced the Cathedral, was that it has stood there for centuries bearing witness to something even older, to the very thing we celebrate this day. And while it’s great to see how the fire in Notre Dame inspired donations to help rebuild the African-American churches recently burned in Louisiana, we need to remember that these churches have more in common than fire. The back-country church, the struggling store-front church in Baltimore, Notre Dame—this church, every church—are here because of that foundational event, and we only exist to share what the women knew and what we know—that God’s love is still rolling stones!³

Isn’t this why we are here today? And why the Christian community gathers every Sunday, because every Sunday is a mini-Easter, every Sunday is the dawn of a new day, a new week, a new world? Despite the cynicism of our world, we know this to be true: resurrection continues to rock the world with hope, and you and I have a duty to go and tell that God’s powerful love is still rolling stones.

Where? My God, everywhere! Granted, it might be tough to see, given the state of things. But it's there. Can you see it? Come, see! I have seen God roll away stones in my own life. And I have seen God roll away stones in the lives of people I know and love, people in this church, beyond this church, people caught, contained, stuck in grief, held by the past, in sorrow, suffering, who live in tombs, covered by stones, sealed and secure—including people who have put the stones there to keep themselves cut off from God's life or because, like the guards, they're fearful before the prospect of resurrection. But sealed stones are no match for God's love.

The poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1866) said, "The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience,"—but with all due respect to Ms. Dickinson, I would say, "The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome resurrection." In unsuspecting moments, in godforsaken and surprising places and people and circumstances, the good news is that resurrection happens and is happening. In love, God is still rolling stones, showing us what resurrection can do, and then releasing us to encounter resurrection along the way of our lives.

Where is God beginning to roll away the stones in your life? What is, right now, waiting to come alive in you? What is now, already, alive in you this morning in ways it never was before, because you know, as the women heard and knew, "He has been raised from the dead" (Mt. 28:7)? And the good news is that he continues to go ahead of us, whether it's Galilee or Catonsville or anywhere. There you will see him—there or maybe here, today, in the Word, at this table, in bread and wine, in the face of the one who sits beside you, in the securely sealed confines of your heart, where you least expect him—there you will see him, coming toward you, saying, "*Xairete!*" Joy to you, sister! Grace to you, by brother!" *Christ is risen! Risen indeed!*

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 322-323.

² The evocative image of John P. Meir, cited in Long, 323.

³ The sermon title is inspired by Christian singer and songwriter Lauren Daigle, her song "Still Moving Stones," from her album *Look Up Child* (Centricity Music, 2018). <https://youtu.be/OieOPo8q7jE>