

“ROLLING STONES”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
April 1, 2018

EASTER SUNDAY

John 20:1-18

In the year 1981, a movie came out starring Harrison Ford called “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” I don’t know how many of you saw it, or how many of you remember it, but there’s one scene, that if you saw the movie, you’ll never forget. It’s the scene where Indiana Jones, Ford’s character, is trying to escape from a cave with his treasure, and a huge boulder rolls up behind him, and as the scene rolls on and the music rises to a crescendo it flies ever faster towards him, threatening to mow him down. Now, I don’t usually let movies get to me too much, but watching that left me hyperventilating. It was too close for comfort!

Then, just because I’m a glutton for punishment, I happened to be at Disney World a few years later and went to see the Raiders of the Lost Ark show, and I got to watch that boulder threaten to flatten poor old Indiana in living color, right in front of my face!

You know, I think of that big huge rolling stone when I read the Easter lesson, mostly of its power and fierceness and how, because of its strength and size it has the power to crush things, or in the case of the tomb of Jesus, totally block anyone from ever entering it again. When those who loved Jesus left his tomb after he was laid in there and that great huge stone was rolled in front of it sealing it, they knew it was over – everything was over. The life they knew was over, the hope they had felt in Jesus was over, evil had won, death had taken away their Savior – it was over – and that stone was a huge round symbol of the end of it all.

But that’s not the only stone in the Easter story – there were lots of them – both literally and figuratively. There was the stone of grief that so many wore. If you’ve ever lost someone you love, you know that grief can feel like a heavy weight on your heart and soul. It’s a burden – a burden of loneliness and hopelessness and incredible, incredible sadness.

It’s the burden that Mary Magdalene was bearing on that first Easter morning as she went back to the tomb in pre-dawn darkness. It’s not hard to imagine that she couldn’t sleep, that her tears just wouldn’t stop, for Jesus, you see, had totally changed her life. She had gone from half-dead in sin to fully alive in Christ. Before him, she had no purpose, after knowing him, she was filled with

purpose and possibility. He treated her with dignity and respect and helped her be the person God created her to be. It was exciting to be around him, and see the things he did, and hear the words he said – and now, all of that, all of that, was gone, just as sure as Jesus was dead and lying lifeless in a tomb. Grief enveloped her and weighed her down on Easter morning.

I don't think she thought going to the tomb would make things any better, I think she just had to do something and so she went back to the last place she had been near him – the tomb. As she drew near, she must have wondered if she was hallucinating because the great huge stone had been rolled away and the tomb was open. That great, huge immovable stone had been rolled away – and, as hard as it is to believe – Mary's grief and pain reached new depths.

All she could figure was that someone had stolen his body. After all that they had done to him – tortured him, beat him, humiliated him, hung him on a cross to die a gruesome death – now, they wouldn't even let him rest in peace. They stole his body.

The scriptures tell us that she ran to tell others – two of the disciples – and they came running back, looked into the tomb, and then, having seen, they went back home. But not Mary. In her grief, and now despair over this turn of events, she stands rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do.

She looks into the tomb again and sees angels who ask her why she's weeping and she explains that someone has taken away the body of her Lord. She is inconsolable. She turns away and when she does, she sees a man standing there. She supposed it was the gardener, and he too, like the angels, asks why she is weeping. Again, she says that someone has taken away the body of her Lord, but then adds that if he knows where Jesus is, would he please tell her? She is desperate.

And then, the man says her name. You know, when I imagine this moment, I imagine him saying it softly and tenderly, almost questioningly, like "Mary?" Almost like, "Hey Mary, recognize my voice? It's me."

Well, however he said it, Mary did indeed recognize him, and in an instant, in the blink of an eye, the stone of her deep grief and despair rolled away and joy filled her heart – because he was alive, standing right in front of her. Her hopes and dreams weren't over, he wasn't gone forever, death hadn't won.

After a few more words with him, she runs off, back to the disciples to tell them the great good news that Jesus was alive, and preached the first resurrection sermon, "I have seen the Lord!"

So much changed on that first Easter morning. So many stones were rolled away – forever.

Like the stone of sin and guilt – rolled away through the death and resurrection of Christ. When Jesus died on the cross, he took the burden of our sin and guilt off of us – he paid the price for us. Never more would guilt have to weigh us down and cut off life.

This year, our Lenten Lunch and Learn class used a study by the great Max Lucado entitled “He Chose the Nails.” In the last session, which we just covered this past Wednesday, Lucado gave a beautiful way of understanding what Jesus did for us on the cross.

He talked about playing in a golf tournament one year – a tournament in which you played in teams, and on each hole, the score recorded was the score of the person who had played best. So Max said, on a hole where he scored an eight, for instance, which is five over par, but his partner made a par, it was that score which was recorded. In other words, his partner paid the price, covered for his mistakes.

So too did Jesus on the cross – he covered for our mistakes – he paid the price for our sins. We were set free from their burden, set free to enjoy new life. The stone of the burden of sin was rolled away at Easter – thanks be to God!

Another stone that was rolled away forever was the fear of death. Jesus rose from death, and so shall we. Death will never have the final word – God does. Though we mourn when someone we love dies, we do not mourn, as Paul says, as those who have no hope – we mourn because we miss everything about them. But because of Easter, we know where they are, and we know, for them, all is well. And we know that when our day comes, life will not end, but begin in a whole new way in our home in heaven.

Knowing that, we have no need to fear dying. You know, I read about a woman recently who clearly, really believed that in her soul. She was pretty old, I think in her nineties, and she had to undergo very serious surgery. No one was sure, including her, that she would survive it. Fortunately, she did survive, but when she was coming out of the anesthesia, in that blurry state, she looked up through her bleary eyes, and saw a man standing there all in white (the surgeon), and she said, “Hello God! My name is Mary!” Now, there’s a woman who doesn’t fear death! She figured she had died, and she was saying hello to God! (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 204)

That’s a little bit of the attitude Winston Churchill had about death. He actually planned his own funeral. It would take place in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London and include many great hymns and scripture readings, but it was the ending that was most special. At the very end of the service, Churchill wanted a

bugler to stand up in that great cathedral and play “Taps.” If you’ve ever heard that at a grave, you know how hauntingly poignant it is. The music just hangs there in the air filled with emotion. But here’s the kicker! As soon as “Taps” was over, Churchill ordered that the bugler break right into playing “Reveille”! You know, “It’s time to get up, it’s time to get up, it’s time to get up in the morning!” Why, because Churchill believed the promise of Easter, and that, for Christians, the last note is not “Taps” but “Reveille” – “it’s time to get up for life hasn’t ended in death, it’s only begun!” (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, “The Attitude of Trust,” p. 102)

So Easter rolls away the stone of sin and guilt, it rolls away the fear of death, and lastly, Easter rolls away the stones, the power of anything that would try to take life away from us every single day – like disease, struggle, disappointment, horrors in our world – anything that tries to diminish life. Easter helps us to remember that God is stronger than any of those things, and indeed, will carry us through all of them.

A good number of us here are members of our church’s prayer chain, which is wonderfully cared for by Rich Juergens. So when I say the name “Adelina” you’ll know who I am talking about, because we’ve been following her journey, her incredible struggle now, since last October, six months or so. But for those of you who don’t know about her, let me tell you her story.

Adelina is a little three year old girl, the daughter of a pastor Dwight and his wife Heather, and sister to five other siblings. Last fall, she went to a fair with her family and petted a snake, at the petting zoo – a pretty ordinary thing for a child to do. She washed her hands afterwards, but apparently not soon enough, because she ended up with a bacterial infection in the E.coli family, found most of the time on snakes. And it has literally ravaged her poor little body.

The list of things she has suffered has been painful to read, and the treatments even more painful to hear about. Damage to her kidneys and stomach, fluid in her body, in her lungs and on her brain. She was on dialysis, had heart issues, and at one point, in one post on-line, they mentioned she was on 17 different machines keeping her alive.

Her journey continues to this day, her struggles continue, but what I want you to know about is her parents, and their Easter faith. It is incredible. Even while they write about the horrors of what she’s going through, they praise God. They put their total trust in him.

On one particularly bad day, early on, when they weren’t even sure Adelina would make it through the night, they wrote this: “The steadfast love of the Lord

never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.”

Oh friends, that’s resurrection faith! That’s the faith of Easter! That’s the faith that says no matter what, God is in charge, and all will be well, and even in the face of everything that might say otherwise, we trust our God with our daughter’s life. It will be okay.

Easter rolls away stones, my friends! Big, imposing, frightening, burdening stones – stones of sin and guilt, stones of death, stones of everything that tries to steal life from us. Easter rolls them away, and life begins again!

Death has been defeated. Jesus is alive! And if God can do that, there is nothing, absolutely nothing he cannot do. So be of good cheer, rejoice! Christ is risen, you have no need to fear ever again! Thanks be to God. Hallelujah! Amen!