Rolling the Stone Away

April 16, 2006 (Easter Sunday)

Isaiah 25:6-9 Psalm 118:14-29 Acts 10:34-43 Mark 16:1-8

"Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

It is early in the morning in Jerusalem. The sun has begun to warm the pale stones that make up the walls of this ancient, holy city, glinting off the bronze standards of the occupying Roman army, giving warmth to the stone of the temple, casting long shadows from the too-common crucifixes which pierce Golgotha.

No one is singing "Welcome happy morning, age to age shall say," because no one knows yet that it *is* a happy morning. (Oh, but it is!)

Yesterday was the Sabbath, a day of rest and stillness, the second day of Passover, the longest day of their lives for the three women now walking on the road from Jerusalem – Mary from Magdela, on the shore of the sea of Galilee, Mary, the mother of Jesus and James, and Salome, mother of the sons of Zebedee.

On Thursday, they had all gathered for the Passover seder, for a meal we call the Last Supper but which was really the first supper, the first Eucharist. That night, Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested, and by Friday morning, he had been sentenced to death. By that afternoon, their friend and teacher was dead, and the women from Galilee prepared the oils and herbs with which to anoint his body.

On Saturday, they rested. They rested because it was the Sabbath; they rested out of faith, out of love of God, even though everything they knew and everything they believed was thrown into disarray by Jesus' death.

On Saturday they rested and waited, and as soon as dawn began on Sunday, they made their way to the tomb.

Now these were smart, strong women. They had gotten through several years of journeying through the countryside with Jesus and with their fellow apostles and disciples. These were women who knew what they were doing.

A friend of mine, Ann Franklin, rector at Good Shepherd, Watertown, has a poster in her house that someone gave her. It says that if there had been three wise *women* rather than three wise men at Jesus' birth, they would have asked for directions, showed up on time, and brought useful gifts!

These three women on the road from Jerusalem were women who you could count on knowing what they were doing.

But this morning, Mary and Salome and Mary were numb with grief; they were on the strange autopilot of grief – *we have to anoint his body, we have to take care of his burial…*

They had already set out down the road to the tomb that Joseph of Aremethea had lent to them, already set out down the road before they remembered how enormous was the stone that had sealed off the cold stone tomb. "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

"Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

I know those stones. Do know those stones as well? They are the stones in our life which stand between us and hope, (and those of you who were hear last night heard a lot about hope) these stones stand between us and hope, they stand between us and love, they stand between us and God. These stones stand between us and the good news of New Life, of resurrection.

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These stones are named Disappointment, Grief, Self-doubt, Despair, Fear. We know those stones in our own lives.

Hunger. War. Injustice. Oppression. These stones are in the world around us –in the Sudan, in Eritrea, in Haiti, in Palestine, in Iraq. But also in Boston, in Newton, in Auburndale; There is hunger in our city as well, food banks that can be overwhelmed -- and the despair of that hunger the anxiety of living one paycheck away from eviction. We know those stones in our lives in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

"Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

One of the stones in my life is one I've preached on before here. When my father, whose birthday was yesterday, when my father died of cancer, I felt betrayed by God. Angry (furious!) and grieved, I stopped praying, I stopped going to church; I started a cycle of self-destruction that lasted for several years.

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Now the summer he was diagnosed, I spent a month hiking in the Talkeetna mountains of Alaska. I wish I could show you how beautiful it was! I remember crossing the Susitna River – water so pure you could drink it right there; imagine doing that with Charles River water! Pure, cold, glacial, life-giving water.

And in the middle of the river were enormous stones, massive boulders, house-sized stones which the river had carried away from the mountains. How could a water carry rock? How could a river wash away such stones, stones the size of houses? But it did. It did. The river moved those stones.

So how could the water of baptism, this water here, carry away the house-sized stones in our own lives?

It took years for me to feel that stone in my life roll away. Slowly, slowly, slowly I found myself trying on prayer again and poking my head into churches. I wouldn't stay for coffee hour, but I'd come in for the first half of the service.

Sometimes the stone is rolled in a crash of thunder, a flood of water. Sometimes the stone is pushed aside bit by bit, imperceptibly until there is clear daylight streaming gloriously, joyfully, into the empty tomb.

It wasn't until my first year of seminary that I realized the stone had been moved long ago; it took several years of learning about healing, about prayer, from friends in church and outside of church.

My father's cancer wasn't *cured*, but I believe he was **healed** – I know, and can finally see, that the last three years of his life were years marked by reconciliation, by sobriety, by love, by the rolling away of stones in his own life, by the rolling away of stones which had been weighing down our own family. I believe he was healed, and I believe it was God that healed him.

When they looked up, Mary and Salome and Mary saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

This is why we are here, because the stone had been rolled away from the tomb; because the stones that seal us off are too large to move alone – but community, friends, prayer, song – all these channels, all these rivers of God's grace, have the power to move those stones away.

You are the rivers of God's grace – each of you. Through baptism, God has poured a river of living water in you, God has begun a good work in you, rolling away the stones in your life, inviting you to help roll away the stones that entomb your brothers and sisters.

That is what it means to be on the side of angels –not that as a church we are perfect, self-righteous; but that we stand with the angel to the right side of the tomb, shouldering aside the stone, letting light into the darkness, sharing with each other the good news: That God is Love, that God call for justice, not

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oppression, that God calls not for slavery or death, but for freedom, for life**.**

We are the rivers of God's grace, each of us. This Easter morning we gather together, we flow together like a great flood, to sing out with joy, with hard-won, heart-felt, glorious joy, ringing out "alleluia, alleluia"

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God will. And *we* will, by God's grace: We will put our shoulder to rock, and we will roll away our neighbor's heavy stone, working for justice, reaching out in love, through prayer and laughter and tears, through the ordinary, extraordinary, friendship, through our love of God, through our determination to seek and serve Christ in everyone.

So in place of our usual Nicene Creed, come step with me into that river of Grace, that water of Baptism that give us hope. Turn to page 292 of your red Book of Common Prayer, to the section titled Renewal of Baptismal Vows, and join me in renewing our baptismal vows:

Celebrant Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?
People **I do.**

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?
People **I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
People **I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.**
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
People **I believe in the Holy Spirit,**
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
People **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
People **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
People **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
People **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
People **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant May Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and bestowed upon us the forgiveness of sins, keep us in eternal life by God's grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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