

The Festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord
St. Mark 16:1-8: "Who Will Roll Away the Stone?"
April 1, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

Could there be a more fitting day for Easter than April 1st? Easter is the day that Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They believe His resurrection means that they will one day rise from the dead too. Could anything be more foolish than this? Has anyone now living seen a dead person come back from the dead? And yet Christians confidently say this will happen, as though there is no doubting it. What fools they are, on April 1st and every day!

And the Christian cannot argue. None of this stands to reason. Believers in Christ struggle with the same sins that unbelievers do. We feel the same pains and infirmities. We die the same death. Why should we be so confident that we—and not they—will rise to eternal life in heaven? What makes us so sure? The answer to the question hinges on whether Jesus was God in the flesh who died and rose again, or whether He was a tremendous liar or lunatic whose remains now reside in a tomb somewhere by the old city walls of Jerusalem.

It is true, as the apostle Paul says, that *"if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins"* (1Cor. 15:17). If you trust in a man named Jesus who was only a man, then you are a fool, because no ordinary man can save you. But if Jesus is who He said He is—the holy Son of God—and if He did what hundreds of eyewitnesses claimed He did—rise from the dead—then the joke is on the world and not you. Then the unconverted may call you a fool, but you are no fool before God.

What the world calls foolishness, God calls salvation. He sent His Son to do for you what the world never could. Our Lord Jesus *"was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification"* (Rom. 4:25). He entered into death and came back to life again, so that you would be assured of life forevermore. Let us now rise to sing our exordium hymn, "He Is Arisen! Glorious Word!" (ELH 348, TLH 189).

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Lord God, heavenly Father, You delivered Your Son for our offenses, and raised Him again for our justification: We beseech You, grant us Your Holy Spirit, that He may rule and govern us according to Your will; graciously keep us in the true faith, defend us from all sins, and after this life raise us to eternal life; through the same, Your beloved Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH p. 155)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. And very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away – for it was very large. / And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go your way, tell His disciples – and Peter – that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you." / And they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (NKJV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the eternal Destroyer of death, dear fellow redeemed:

The two Marys and Salome dutifully observed the Sabbath, but that troubled day could not pass soon enough. Their great Teacher and Lord had been shamefully killed the day before. They could not reverse what had been done, but at least they could bury His remains more properly. They woke up early in the morning and made their way toward His tomb. Preoccupied with their thoughts, they did not consider another important matter until they were nearly there: *"Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb?"*

Three days before in the late afternoon of Good Friday, the women had watched Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus quickly prepare Jesus for burial, needing to finish before the Sabbath started at sundown. They laid Him in Joseph's new tomb, which had been cut out of a rock in the middle of a garden. In order to keep thieves and wild animals out, they rolled a large stone against the tomb's entrance and hurried away.

I

For the women approaching at daybreak, that big stone was a big problem. It was too heavy to roll back, to tip over, or to pry up. And at this time of day, no one would be coming along to help – that is if they were even willing to open up a tomb for them in the first place. The women had no ready solution to the problem that lay ahead.

You and I have times like that in our lives too. We are faced with big problems that seem like immovable stones. There are troubles and trials and sins that we do not know how to overcome. There are burdens that overwhelm us and weigh us down, so that we do not know how to escape from under them. These "big stones" can get in the way of healthy communication among family members. They can stand in the way of a strong and loving marriage. They can affect our relationship with members of our community and our church.

Sometimes *we* set up these big stones, and sometimes *others* put them in our way. The big stones we set up might be the need to always be right or have the last word. They might be our stubborn refusal to forgive those who have offended us, or to apologize for our unkindness. They might be addictions that we work harder to cover up than we do to address.

For the times that we try to show love to our neighbors, but they reject our help and choose to put the worst construction on our actions or words, we cannot move these big stones on our own. We commend these stones to God in prayer, knowing that nothing is impossible with Him.

Like the women in today's account, the big stones in our lives cannot be removed by hoping they will just go away, by trying really hard to move them, or by blaming others for our problems. Our sin and the sin of others does not budge easily. It is anchored in our hearts, and it stands in the way of God and eternal life.

If sin did not weigh us down, none of us would have to be concerned about the greatest obstacle in life, which is death. But all of us are concerned about death, because all of us are sinners. Sin leads to death. When death comes, the lifeless body of the deceased is placed in a coffin and sealed in a vault. It all looks very final. It makes us sad. It worries us, because we know our time is coming too. Death is the biggest barrier, the biggest stone that stands in our way. The women wondered who would roll away the stone from Jesus' tomb, but we wonder who will roll away the stone from ours.

The women received their answer when they looked up to see that the large stone already had been rolled away! Mary Magdalene turned around immediately to convey the message to Peter and John that someone had taken the body of the Lord. The other women continued on to the tomb, where the angel reassured them, "*Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him.*" Before, the women were fretting about how the stone might be removed, so that they could anoint Jesus' dead body. Now the tomb was open, and they were told by an angel that Jesus had risen!

This is how Jesus takes care of the big boulders of our sin that we cannot see a way around. He crushes the sin that stands in His way, and He produces a better solution to our problems than we could have imagined. While we turn our sins and difficulties into mountains, Jesus makes them insignificant molehills. Our sins are not too big for God. He rolled them all out of our way through the holy death of Jesus.

II

But can we really be sure of this? From our perspective, our problems are as big as ever, and they do not seem to go away. We might still *feel* lost, and we are desperately afraid that sin and Satan will overcome us. How can we be certain that Jesus paid for our sins? How can we know that we will be safe when death takes us?

The answer is in Jesus' empty tomb. He was not there when the stone was rolled away. He had risen! The strong bands of death could not hold Him fast. Satan could not drag Him forever into hell. Our Lord's resurrection proves that He was not simply a righteous Man, but that He is the holy God who suffered and died for our sins, and who rose again in victory! His resurrection is the declaration to the whole world that sin is forgiven, Satan is defeated, and death is annihilated. "*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*" (1Co. 15:55).

Through His resurrection, Jesus changed our cemeteries from places of death and hopelessness, to places of anticipation and even joy. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, all who are

faithful to Him unto death will also receive the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). Our cemeteries are simply resting places, temporary habitations, where the bodies of the dead are safely kept until Christ's triumphant return on the Last Day.

But how will these bodies escape from their graves? **Who Will Roll Away the Stone** of death from the door of their tombs? Jesus, the One who has already risen, has promised to see to it personally. He will awaken our sleeping bodies with a powerful shout, and He will dispatch His angels to gather us from our tombs to meet the Lord in the air (Mk. 13:27, 1Th. 4:16).

This event will paralyze the unbelieving world with fear, just as it paralyzed the soldiers standing guard at Jesus' tomb. But for all who believe in the crucified and risen Savior, this will be a day greater than any other day before it. This will be the day of our resurrection from the dead, the day of our ultimate victory over sin, death, and the devil.

You do not need to wonder if this victory will be yours on that day. This victory is already yours by faith. At your baptism, your sins were buried with Christ in His tomb, and in that same baptism you were raised to new life in Him. Even while you stand in the midst of death, you can rejoice and give thanks for your baptism into Christ, through which you have been given His righteousness and life.

You need not wonder how the stone of your death will be rolled away. Jesus' tomb stands wide open. He is eternally alive, which means that your sin and your death are eternally dead. The Lord is risen! **He is risen indeed!** *Alleluia!*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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