

Rolling Back the Stone  
Isaiah 25: 6-9; Mark 16: 1-8

As we gather this Easter morning to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, the mighty work of God's love overcoming all the resistance the world put up against it, we begin with listening to the words of the prophet Isaiah from the Hebrew Scripture, speaking to us from the time and space even further back beyond the event of Christ's resurrection.

The voice of Isaiah echoes from God's mountain the promise God has made to all peoples...all the way down to you and me and those who will follow... the promise of a feast, not just good food and wine but of the top-notch, highest quality.

If you are someone who feasted on such goodness on a daily basis, this promise may not mean so much. So, this promise of God, while it is to all people, is especially for those who live with the pain and misery of hunger and thirst. I know many of you just came up from the top-notch pancake breakfast downstairs; so, if it is not for food, what do you hunger and thirst for? God wants and intends to more than satisfy you in those cavities in your being and make you whole.

Then, Isaiah says, God has promised to swallow up death forever. God will destroy death and release us from its cold, tight grip and from all that saps joy out of our Life. Then, to top it off, God will wipe away the tears of grief and shame not only from all our faces but from the face of this earth; for we know, nations grieve and mourn as well, even in this very hour, in the corners of this earth, known and unbeknownst to us.

Can you just imagine and feel in your body such release, such relief, and finally, imagine being filled with the joy everlasting, not just for you but for the whole world, for that person that you are worried about, who seem beyond help, and for that situation in that country where centuries of human struggle have not brought a resolution. That is what God has promised; all this God will do, "on that day," Isaiah tells us. On that day, it will be said "this is our God for whom we have waited." Today, we wait. We don't just wait, but we "await"; for God has promised God will do this, and God's promise is our destiny.

With this promise of God still alive and filling the air we breathe even this morning, let us turn to that morning after the Sabbath, after Jesus was crucified and his body buried in the tomb. Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark, chapter 16: 1-8, the very end of the Gospel written by him.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, *had already been rolled back*. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. *He has been raised*; he is not here. Look, there is the place *they laid him*. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So, 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.

After hearing Mark tell us, in the Passion narrative last Sunday, how the male disciples of Jesus betrayed, denied, and deserted Jesus and fled, it is comforting to see these women emerge from the distance and come to take care of Jesus’s body. Judas had sold Jesus over to the religious authorities and betrayed him with a kiss. The last time we heard of Peter, he was weeping bitterly, for he had denied Jesus three times, swearing up and down that he didn’t know him, before the cock crowed the second time, just as Jesus said he would. And when the crowd sent by the authorities came to arrest Jesus, the disciples all deserted him and fled.

But these very women, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and Salome, having followed Jesus and provided for his ministry in Galilee, continue to follow him from the distance, even after his arrest, saw him crucified, and still following, saw where his body was laid. They did not miss any of it. They loved Jesus beyond death, and as soon as they could, they came to the tomb to anoint him, to serve him still even in death. As they hurried to the tomb, their concern was who would roll away this large stone that stood between them and their beloved Lord. And yet.....

They arrived and saw the large stone had been rolled away. So, they went in and saw God’s messenger, telling them that Jesus has been raised, he’s not there. The messenger also gave them the message to give to the disciples that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee where he would meet them. But the women, who were not scared away by the death of Jesus they witnessed, fled in fear, when they were confronted with the “good news” that their Lord lived, something that was beyond their grasping.

They fled and, defying the messenger from God, did not tell anyone anything, for they were afraid. The messenger seems like he was counting on them to go remind the disciples of the “Plan” Jesus had shared with them while he was still with them. Alas, in the end, as the Gospel

writer Mark tells us, not even the women who loved Jesus to death could be relied upon, to carry out God's plan that was beyond their comprehension. So, who else is left? Who rolled away the stone and let Jesus out, anyway?

In this passage, two things happened that are described in the passive voice. The first is that the stone had been rolled back. It doesn't say who did it. The second is "He has been raised." Again, by whom, it doesn't say. In the biblical tradition, this is a way of describing something when the actor is God, without saying God's name or writing the word God. In both these critical actions of rolling back the stone and raising Jesus from death, God is the actor. In raising Christ, God has conquered death and all that resists Life.

Ever since God established the covenant with God's people, for the redemption of all peoples, God has been at work, rescuing, redeeming, restoring and reconciling us, even when we fail to keep our end of the covenant, which is simply to remain in relationship with God. The story of our lives has forever been God's faithfulness and our unfaithfulness. The story of our relationship has been, God bending over backwards to show us the way of God, even resorting to sending God's Son to show us, and the world still managed to get rid of him the most horrific way. That happened, in our world.

By raising Jesus, God overcame even our worst betrayal. Our hope and comfort is that, God will not let even our unfaithfulness, our betrayal, our sin, to stand between God and us. In the words of an Episcopalian minister John Claypool, "The worst things are never the last things, and the final sound of history will not be "Taps" but Reveille."

So, if God is going to keep the promise and accomplish all that God promises, like Isaiah said, should we just wait? Can we just kick back and watch as the world go around? That doesn't seem to be an option, because, the risen Christ is stilling going ahead of us, expecting us to come and meet where he leads us. God will do what God promised, but somehow it involves us, unfaithful and unreliable as we are. By all fair assessment, we are not any better than the disciples, yet we, with all our imperfection, are somehow part of God's perfect plan, just as the disciples and the women had been.

Mark, the earliest Gospel, has the shortest ending... but if you'd been listening to Mark's story straight through, you'd remember Jesus was always going before the disciples, telling them to come after him, and even when Jesus was still with them, he told them that after he is raised, he would go before them to Galilee...supposedly to meet the disciples there who were to come

after him. The readers of this Gospel would know that the story cannot end with the death and burial of Jesus. There is more...

But Mark the author of the Gospel drops his pen in mid-sentence, with the preposition “for,” describing the women who fled in fear. Perhaps he didn’t drop his pen like he dropped his mic. Rather, he hands the pen to us, not to creatively write the “rest” of the story using your imagination, like some did later, adding the “shorter” and a “longer” ending... but to enter into the story and continue living it. Yes, the Gospel of Mark with its ending lacking in a sense of closure, compels us to live on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the end of the Gospel, Mark doesn’t drop the mic, but instead pass it onto us. You’re resurrected people; you can do it, because God of faithfulness is with us.

Mark’s ending is no end; only the readers and the hearers can bring closure, as we yield our lives to the faithfulness of God. The reader must pick up where Mark left off.

God rolled away the stone, for our sake, so Jesus could enter Life Eternal for us to partake in that Life. We are the resurrection people empowered by Christ’s resurrection to roll away the stones so others can live. What is the stone that God would have us roll back? If the stone stands for something that keeps the Life God intends for us from really being lived? Perhaps it brings us to notice the painful and hard places in ourselves and in our world, like the hunger and thirst we carry within us.

The stone may seem too large and our efforts may feel like in vain, but we can work at it with hope and joy, because we know, as Isaiah tells us, God has promised to make it happen. Thanks be to God.