

Let Go of the Stone
Mark 16:1-8

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A friend and colleague of mine was declared dead by the IRS a few years ago, even though he was very much alive. Due to MS, Jim was confined to a wheel chair and depended on disability Social Security for survival. So you can imagine the shock of being informed you are dead and no longer eligible for benefits. Jim called the IRS. They asked him multiple questions, but could not by conversation declare Jim to be alive. He wrote them letters and sent them pictures, but such correspondence did no good. It was only after Jim hired a lawyer and took legal action that Jim officially moved from the dead to the living. Jim, who kept his sense of humor through the ordeal, said to a reporter: “You have heard of Dead Man Walking. I guess you could say I am Dead Man Rolling as I go here and there in my wheelchair.”

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SOMETIMES SEEM TO BE. Have you discovered that to be true?

Such was the case that first Easter so long ago. Very early on the first day of the week, Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene, a devoted follower of Jesus; and Salome, the mother of James and John; make their way to the tomb to finish the embalming rituals left undone in the darkness of Good Friday. As they travel along, one question lingers on their minds: WHO WILL ROLL AWAY THE STONE FROM THE ENTRANCE OF THE TOMB? On this Easter Sunday 2003, I would like to land on that question.

You hold a little stone in your hand today. Officially, these are called worry rocks. They represent the burdens you carry, the worries that make you weary, the doubts that do you in, the heartbreaks that hold you hostage, the duty that drags you down. On that rock is a personal, hand written message for you—HE IS RISEN. I have come to tell you today: Things are not always what they sometimes seem to be. GOD STILL MOVES STONES.

Let go of the stone of **HEARTBREAK** and embrace a life of **HOPE**.

Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours or mine. In the last few months, Sandy and I have buried our grandson and walked through the valley of the shadow of death with my father. Quite candidly I must admit the grief is greater than I imagined, the sorrow is deeper than I anticipated. Morning after morning I rise from my sleep saying, “Lord, I need to snap out of this,” yet the fog is dense, the sadness lingers, and the fact remains, my generation is next in line to leave this world. For a while I thought at fifty-seven, maybe I’m having a mid-life crisis. Then, Sandy shocked me back to reality by asking, “Exactly how many 114 year old men do you know?”

What we face is minor compared to the great troubles of the world. Some of you have loved ones in the military still in harm's way. We have watched on television as Iraqi homes are bombed away. Unemployment lingers and some of you know its depths. Illness has a way of returning. Some of you are on the third, fourth, and fifth rounds of chemotherapy. There are people in this congregation who got a letter from a spouse saying, "I don't love you anymore." There are parents who get phone calls from children saying, "Stay out of my life." I suspect all of us have spent some time in Heartbreak Hotel.

While we wonder what we are going to do, God restores our hope. Ready or not, Easter happens. Easter is not of us; Easter is of God. Right out in the graveyard where people are dead and gone there comes the glorious announcement that Jesus Christ is alive and here. Because He lives, we too have the hope of resurrection. No grief will last forever. No sorrow enjoys eternal life. Someday wars will end and we will beat our tanks into farming machinery and our guns into gardening tools. Rolled away, rolled away, rolled away, let the heartaches of your life roll away.

Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking U.S. official held as a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton. Tortured over 20 times during his eight-year imprisonment, Stockdale, who walks now with a limp says, "I never doubted that I would not only get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn this experience into a defining event of my life, which I have done."

The pessimists give up in despair. The optimists give in and die, the hopeful hang on until help comes from the Lord. CHRIST IS RISEN. Let go of the stone of heartbreak; embrace the life of hope.

LET GO OF THE STONE OF FEAR AND EMBRACE A LIFE OF FAITH.

An infrequent traveler checked into a hotel room and immediately called the front desk for help. "I'm trapped inside my room, explained the traveler anxiously. "How could you be trapped?" inquired the clerk. "Well," said the traveler, "I see three doors. One opens into a closet, another opens into the bathroom, and the third has a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on it. I need some help."

The University of Michigan Institute for social research in a recent survey asked people if they were hopeful about the future. One in five said, "Yes." In 1990 seven in ten said, "Yes." Why are we feeling so trapped these days? Fatalism is the attitude that makes us live as passive victims of exterior circumstances beyond our control. Faith is the deep trust that God's love is stronger than all the anonymous powers of the world and can transform us from victims of darkness into servants of light.

"Fear not" is one of the most recurring phrases in the Bible.
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?
Surely it is God who saves us, let us trust in him and not be afraid.
Fear not for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy.
Fear not those who kill the body but cannot touch the soul.
There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear.
Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, he has risen, just as he said.*

In every problem, God is there to consult. In every effort, He is there to help. In every sorrow, God is there to comfort. On every dark road, He is there to banish fear. Even in the sunshine, He is there to make joy doubly dear. CHRIST IS RISEN. Let go of the stone of fear and embrace a life of faith.

LET GO OF THE STONE OF BEWILDERMENT AND EMBRACE A LIFE OF BELIEF.

It is suggested that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the Gospels and that these first eight verses are the original resurrection story. If it is, then it is really not very hopeful. The words that are recurring here are "scared," "trembling," "bewildered." *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb because they were afraid* (Mark 16:8). Bewildered means confounded, confused, distracted, dumbfounded, disconnected, dazed, mixed-up. Is there anywhere we are more bewildered these days than about our beliefs? What do we believe? Whom do we believe? How do we believe?

A friend said to me there are two groups of people who attend church on Easter—those who believe and those who wish they could believe. What would it mean for you to let go of the stone of doubt and embrace a life of belief?

In 1979, Leslie Strobel, wife of journalist, Lee Strobel, came home and announced that she had become a Christian. "I rolled my eyes and braced for the worst," writes Lee. "I had married a fun, carefree, risk-taking Leslie and now I feared she was going to turn into some sexually repressed prude who would trade our upwardly mobile lifestyle for all night prayer vigils and grimy soup kitchens." Instead, I was pleasantly surprised and even fascinated by the fundamental changes in her character, her integrity, her personal confidence."

"A skeptic myself, I finally decided I'd use my training from Yale Law School and my experience as a legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune to examine this God phenomenon which appeared to be a lot of wishful thinking. Twenty-one months later, on Sunday, November 8, 1981, the atheism I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical fact. So I talked with God in a heartfelt prayer, admitting and turning from my wrong doing, and receiving the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ. There were no lightning bolts, no audible replies, no tingling sensations. There was simply the rush of reason. That day I believed." Wouldn't you like to let go of the stone of bewilderment—embrace a life of belief?

LET GO OF THE STONE OF **DUTY** AND EMBRACE A LIFE OF **DELIGHT**.

When the great, blind, Scottish preacher, George Matheson, became the pastor of St. Bernard's Church in Edinburgh, there was an old woman in that parish who lived in a cellar. The living conditions were miserable, but they had been that way so long for her that it all seemed normal. Then, one day when an elder went to visit the woman, he discovered she had moved to a humble, but clean, bright attic apartment. "I see you have changed your living quarters," said the elder. The lady replied, "Ay, I have. You canna hear George Matheson preach and live in a cellar."

CHRIST IS RISEN. If that reality ever gets a hold of your heart, you won't be able to live in a cellar any longer. Easter Christians have a fire in their souls, gratitude on their faces, a twinkle in their eye, a holy mischief in their demeanor. After all, they are guardians of the greatest story ever told. What else can we do with it but rejoice?

Wouldn't you like to be delightful again? A reporter called me and asked me what my sermon was about Sunday. I started to give him my standard answer: "About God and about 20 minutes." He sounded sincere, so I said, "I'm going to ask people to trade heartache for hope, fear for faith, bewilderment for belief, and duty for delight." He paused a minute and said, "All that sounds nice, but how can people do it?" I said, "If God has the power to raise Jesus Christ from the dead, can He not also empower us to let go of the stones that are weighing us down?"

A delightful thing you could do today is to say with Paul, *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection* (Philippians 3:10).

Christ still moves stones
He breaks the power of sin
And makes a way for us to boldly enter in.
And though the stone that holds you
Binds you all alone
He is your hope
He still moves stones.

Amen.

