

## God rolls stones away

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, March 27, 2016  
The Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ

*John 20:1-18 (NRSV): Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today is the Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ! Today we look for the living among the dead as we remember the victory of Jesus Christ over death and sin, the victory that leads us to new life and rolls away the stone of tragedy in our lives.

I want to share with you a true story of a little boy who had some trouble at school. He was the new kid in town, moving from the suburbs into the inner city. His classmates were rough with him, and he often came home crying. He felt the hurt of his bullies not only in his body, but in his discouraged soul. He was sad and he didn't know what to do.

Then one day, out on the playground, he fell to the ground, hurt. He said that his legs were hurt too much from people kicking him. Perhaps he was exaggerating a little, but the boy refused to walk. Then something amazing happened. Those same boys who had pushed him around came up to him and helped him to his feet. They put their arms under his arms—one boy on each side, and helped him to walk around the playground until that new kid in town could trust them again.

When he came home that day, the boy was no longer in tears, but full of excitement. He knew of only one way to describe his experience to his parents. "Everything was bad, but then God rolled the stone away!" God rolled the stone away!

This little boy had heard the Easter Story. He knew about the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead, and he knew the power of God to raise *him* up and to heal not only his body, but his

broken relationships with his peers as well. The power of God at Easter was made real in his life: God rolled the stone away!

That little boy found grace and renewal in the face of his fears. He is not the only one worried with fears. In fact, fear seems to be a valuable commodity these days. Countless forms of news media thrive on our fears. We fear terrorists, we fear the zika virus. Some fear immigrants and others fear presidential candidates. We're nervous about our future, our kid's future, or our parent's future. We're afraid of losing our dreams—we may even have lost some dreams already.

We're afraid of losing our relationships; we're afraid of confrontation or conflict. And we've felt the loss of our own failures—our flaws, our grave mistakes, our well-proven ability to let ourselves down and to let others down. Deep inside, many of us are somewhat afraid to open ourselves to God—afraid of what God might say to us, or reluctant to approach God because we have neglected our relationship with God. What would God say to us?

On the first day of the week after Jesus was crucified, the disciples had lost everything. One of them had betrayed Jesus, at least one other had denied Jesus. All had left him, except for a few women. The disciples cowered in fear behind locked doors, and some left town to get away from the authorities. While so many were afraid, one of his disciples, Mary Magdalene<sup>1</sup> went to Jesus' tomb. She had waited over the Sabbath, but now, she wanted to anoint Jesus' body for his burial. She was burdened by her grief and loss.

But when she arrived at the tomb, she found that God sometimes works in unimaginable ways—and that God's power is more than wishful thinking. The stone had been rolled away! The tomb was empty! Jesus is alive! He is risen! Beyond all hope, her sorrow turned to joy, and she returned to the apostles with the news of the resurrection!

Despite the injustice of Rome, despite the hatred of the crowds, the pain of his torture and the reality of his death, Jesus is alive, and he gives his disciples forgiveness and new life. Despite the hardships that they will still face in their lives, the disciples have new life in their risen Lord. Their fears no longer held them behind locked doors, but they went into the world rejoicing with boldness! Their new life in Jesus was greater than any of their losses, stronger than any of their fears!

We have seen that same power of Jesus at work in our own lives. In Christ, dead relationships rise to new life again. Through Christ, we give up our bitterness, our defensiveness, our stubborn self-interest. We share the mercy of God with others and the forgiveness of God with others, and we welcome others into the reconciling embrace of God in Jesus Christ. God rolls the stones away for us too.

About a month ago, I joined several of our parishioners who went to hear a man give his talk at the MUST Ministries Extension. The Extension is a shelter and program for men whose lives have been virtually destroyed by addiction. The speaker that night had been addicted to drugs for years, in and out of rehab, constantly fighting his friends and family and the system that was trying to help him. But as bleak as his story sounded, he eventually surrendered his life to God,

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<sup>1</sup> There were 12 Apostles, but many more disciples.

and God set him free from the bonds of addiction, and gave him new life, one day at a time. The man challenged his listeners who were just starting the program that no matter where they had been, no matter what they had done, no matter how many times they had failed or how impossible it sounds, they, too, can be free. They, too, can have a new life. This is the power of the resurrection of Jesus! This is not the power of a mere story. This is the power of a living Lord who changes lives.

In Christ, the sick are healed, those bound in despair are set free, and in Christ the dead will rise to new life in him. In Christ, our fears and our sins do not have the last word—not even death has the last word. Each of us knows something of the power of God in our lives. Each of us has seen God roll away the stone. Each of us is a witness to the resurrection, and the new life that God gives us.

So where do you see the power of the risen Lord Jesus in your own life? Are you looking for him? Are you open to finding him? Have you prayed for the power of God's presence in your life? Whatever your fears, whatever your frustrations, whatever your failures, God loves you! God loves you! God loves you enough to send his Son to live and die and rise again that you might have new life in him! That's the Good News! That's what we celebrate today! God rolled away the stone door of that tomb, and God rolls away the stones in our own lives as well.

Join with us today as witnesses to God's great love for us. Join with us in the joy of a transformed life in him. Join with us in a new life, growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We have walked the valley of the shadow of death in Holy Week, and we have arrived at Easter morning rejoicing in Jesus' victory over sin and death. So we raise the acclamation of the church at the Feast of the Resurrection:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!