



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

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### ***“Rolling Stones”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Mark 16: 1-8*

*March 27, 2016 - Easter*

As we approach Easter, each year, there are countless images that arise in our minds as we make our way through Holy Week and towards this resurrection worship.

- We picture that Palm Sunday scene, and we imagine the crowds lining the streets as Jesus rides into town on the back of a donkey. We can almost hear the crowds cheering and see the palm branches waving as we envision the events of that triumphal entry into Jerusalem
- We encounter the events of Maundy Thursday and we picture Jesus seated with his disciples handing out the bread and the cup, we imagine Jesus kneeling in the garden praying while the Disciples are falling asleep in the distance, and we see the guards emerging from the horizon as Judas kisses Jesus on the cheek and turns him over to be tried.
- We envision the crowds chanting for his crucifixion, Jesus walking towards Golgotha (barely able to carry the cross on which he will be hanged) and Mary weeping as Jesus marches towards his death.
- We encounter that image of Jesus hanging on the cross, common criminals at his side, as he cries out “Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit!” and breaths his last.
- But, then, with a grace and glory that only God could provide, our minds turn and we are able to picture the empty tomb, and everything that goes with it!

As we approach Easter, each year, we are overrun with images that arise in our hearts and minds as we recall and embrace each step of the story that unfolded. But, I think one of the most powerful (and yet most overlooked) images of the entire Passion story, lies in that of the stone that was rolled away from the entrance of the tomb.

Imagine, if you will, the circumstance of these three women who are making their way to the tomb that morning. These are women who have walked by Jesus’ side for years. These are women who have witnessed his miracles, listened to his teachings, learned from his lessons, and supported his ministry in countless ways and in countless situations. But then, as if out of nowhere, everything had fallen apart. This man they believed to be the Messiah had been killed.

The man they believed would usher in a new chapter for Israel had been handed over and crucified. Their hopes, their dreams, and their expectations (all of which had resided in the person and life of Jesus) had been shattered. So, for them, there was really only one thing left to do – to give this man they loved the anointing and burial their faith called for and he so richly deserved. And, it was precisely that which they headed out to do that morning. But, as they realized along at some point the way, there was a problem – and it's a problem that I think doesn't get nearly enough attention.

You see, the crucifixion had taken place just before the Sabbath. Jesus was crucified mid-day, and when the sun set that night, the Sabbath was to begin. So, while their faith called for a specific anointing and treatment in order to prepare the body for burial, their faith also called for an observance of the Sabbath – so there wasn't time for those burial preparations to take place prior to the beginning of the Sabbath at sunset. The only thing they could do was seal his body in that unused tomb and return after the Sabbath to perform the proper rituals.

So, that's the backdrop of the scene that opens in the passage from Mark. The Sabbath is behind them and they are marching towards his tomb at sunrise in order to do what they have been anxious to do since they left the tomb two days before. But, then, someone speaks up. "Hold on. Who's going move the stone?" It's an often overlooked line in this story from Mark – and I get the sense from the passage that, up until a certain point on their walk, it is a question that probably hadn't crossed the minds of the women. But, all of sudden, it strikes them. They're so set on getting there to do what has to be done – that they never really thought about that boulder that stood in their way.

You see, while I think we don't always think about the nature of this rock, the truth is that the stone in front of the tomb was big. There are debates as to the exact nature of the stone – it's often portrayed as something of a huge wheel that would be rolled down a slope and into place after burial, while other scholars suggest it was more of a cork-like shape that inserted into the small entrance to the tomb. But, the resounding truth is that, regardless of those specifics, this would have weighed hundreds of pounds, if not more, and simply would not have been something these three women would have been able to move.

So, with that knowledge in place, consider, again, that scene that Mark gives us. These three women, sacred elements in hand for the anointing of Jesus' body, are rushing down the road towards the tomb at sunrise, when one of the women has this sudden realization, stops the others, and asks with a certain degree of disbelief, "Who's going move the stone?" We don't get any more details about the dialog that takes place at that moment, but you can almost picture the scene that unfolded. I can imagine Mary Magdalene dropping her items on the ground in frustration. I can envision the glances, the glares and the words that were shot through the triad in the minutes that followed. I can picture a lot of what probably happened in that moment, but the truth is that we don't get any more detail on that dialog. What I would suggest, however, is that the reason we don't get any more of that dialog is that, regardless of what took place between the women in that moment, a fascinating thing occurred after that question was asked – they kept going!

Think about that! These three women are on their way to anoint Jesus' body for burial when they suddenly realize that there is an enormous boulder standing between them and what they feel compelled to do. The more I have considered that reality, the more I have asked myself why. Why would they keep going? Why would they press on? Why would they continue on this journey knowing, full-well, what stood in their way.

- They certainly didn't think they would have the strength to move it.
- They clearly would not have expected the guards to have been of any help.
- Every account of the resurrection has them returning to tell the other disciples about what happened – so, obviously, they weren't relying on them.
- And, no one understood that the resurrection was at hand – so we know they didn't expect to find the empty tomb, as they did.

So, why? Knowing that there was this insurmountable obstacle in their way, why did they not simply turn around and go home? The more I've considered the story of these three women, the more I've asked that question. But, the more I've asked that question, the more I've come to to one profound answer.

Consider what these women have witnessed over the three years leading up to this moment.

- To those who were blocked by illness, injury and disease, Jesus brought healing and comfort.
- To those who were blocked by social segregation and judgment, Jesus brought welcome and fellowship.
- To those who were blocked by sin, Jesus brought grace and forgiveness.
- To those who were blocked by the rigors and restraints of traditionalism, Jesus brought wisdom and understanding.
- To those who were blocked by death (both spiritual and literal), Jesus brought new life (both spiritual and literal).

I could go on and on with that list, but the point is that the more I've asked the question of why these women would keep going knowing what stood in their way, the more I have come to believe that they kept going because they had faith.

- They kept going, because they believed that, in Jesus, God had had moved the stones that had blocked the ill, the broken, the diseased, the sinful, the outcasts, the entrenched and even the dead.
- They kept going, because they had seen Jesus break through every barrier that people encountered.
- They kept going because they had the faith to trust that somehow, some way, God would move the stone that stood in their way just as they had seen God move so many stones before.
- They kept going, because they had the faith to trust in God despite their obstacles! And, sure enough, when they looked up, the stone was already gone!

There's a saying that Jesus 'died for my someday, but lives for my today!' I think in Christian circles, especially at Easter, we're pretty good with the 'died for my someday' part. We're pretty good at remembering the images, picturing the betrayals, and envisioning the crucifixion. We're

pretty good (and rightfully so) at celebrating and rejoicing in the grace, mercy and salvation that is granted to us through this Passion story.

But, I find myself wondering how often we miss out on the 'lives for my today' part. I find myself wondering how often we come to the empty tomb and take solace in the fact that Jesus' death was only temporary, instead of rejoicing in the fact that the resurrection promises that Jesus' presence is everlasting. I find myself wondering how often we get so wrapped up in the crucifixion and the empty tomb that we miss out on the simple, and yet profound, image of that stone that had been rolled away.

Those women marched towards that tomb knowing that there was an enormous boulder standing between them and what they were trying to do. But, they kept marching forward because they believed. They kept going because they had the faith to trust in the one who brought healing to the sick, comfort to the hurting, courage to the fearful, strength to the weak, wisdom to the confused, direction to the lost, sight to the blind, words to the mute, forgiveness to the sinners and life to the dead. Those women kept going because they believed that the one who spent his entire ministry moving the stones that stood in front of God's children would move their stone as well. And, sure enough, through their trust and the grace of God, when they looked up, the stone was already gone!

We're pretty good at the 'Jesus died for my someday' part. But, I wonder how often we forget that the resurrection is the promise that Jesus lives for our today. I wonder how often we forget the image of that stone being rolled away from the tomb, and miss out on the miraculous truth that the Easter miracle not only rolls the stone away from our death someday, but promises that Jesus will remain with us to move our stones as we press forward in this life, today! Those women kept going because they trusted that God would roll their stone away. And, he did! And, the empty tomb promises that Jesus lives to do the very same for us today.

So, the next time you stand face to face with adversity and wonder how you could possibly make it through – the next time you're face to face with your own immovable boulder – try to remember the faith of those women and the image of that empty tomb. They knew adversity, they faced a challenge, and they were confronted by their impossible task. But, in faith, they kept going – trusting that God would move that stone just as he had so many other before. And, sure enough, through their trust and the grace of God, when they looked up, it was already gone!

*Will you join me in prayer...*

God of all times and generations, all peoples and all places, your story is the never-ending tale of moving the immovable boulders in the lives of your beloved children. You have parted waters, fed people from the sky, drawn water from a rock, used young boys to topple mighty warriors, fed thousands with food enough only for a few, healed the sick, restored the lame and brought to life the dead. And, today, we come to the glory and wonder of the empty tomb reminded that you have removed the final boulder from our lives and promised to remain to do the same in each day that we live.

We praise you, God, for the eternal life in your very glory that you have opened to us through the resurrection. We thank you for the gift of your son, and for the promise fulfilled in his resurrection, and lift our voices, our minds, our spirits and our hearts in songs of praise as we rejoice in your unmatched glory and unending love.

We praise you also, God, for those immovable stones you have rolled, are rolling, and will roll away in our lives. For the frailties we can't conquer, for the addictions we can't overcome, for the sorrows we can't bear, for the pains we can't handle, for the loneliness we can't endure, for the grief we can't manage, for the stresses we can't carry, for the innumerable struggles, battles and hurdles we cannot and will not surmount on our own – we praise you that these are the very immovable and insurmountable boulders that you can move for us because of the promise of the risen and ever-present Christ in our lives.

So, hear our praise, God. Hear the songs that we lift in celebration of your glory and grace, the prayers we raise in thanks for your work among us, and the lives we offer in honor of your life given and restored for us. May we, this day, find the faith of those women to trust in your promises, rely on your power, and move ever forward – confident and assured that you, through the promise of the risen Christ, will be all we ever need to remove the immovable boulders that stand between us and the lives you call us to live.

It is this and all things that we pray in the name and spirit of our risen Lord and Savior. Amen.