

Easter in Plain Sight: The Rolling Stones

Luke 24:1-12

April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“They found the stone rolled away from the tomb...”

Luke 24:2a

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, easter us into the new life you have given to us in Christ: roll away the stones that keep us from living for you. Amen.

Message

It is good to see each of you, particularly those we don't see too often, and it is good have folks join us online. Know that we are glad you are here and know that we are grateful you can connect regardless of where you are; we hope you will return.

Please remember that we are open on the other fifty-one Sundays of the year too! However, with the pandemic, this might be your first time back in over two years, so we are glad you have come.

Indeed, I once heard the story about a woman who confronted her minister at the door after worship one Easter. She complained to him, “Why is it every time I come to church, you're always singing that same hymn, ‘Christ the Lord Is Risen Today’?” It's clear how often she made it to worship.

If you are here, or online, and this is your first time, we do welcome you, and if so, you might not have trouble recognizing the sermon title “The Rolling Stones.” For good or bad, this Rock and Roll group created a culture rarely seen. They were, of course, quite popular. But this rock group is not the “original” rolling stone.

As we just read, there was the original rolling stone in 33 CE, the one which reveals to the world the power of God in Christ.

To understand this power, though, we need to go back to Good Friday, when Jesus dies on the cross and his body is placed in a tomb. Then, there was an

enormous stone which the Romans placed on the entrance of the tomb. This stone was huge. Solid. Heavy. Indeed, immovable. It is one of those rocks that was most unforgiving. In fact, it had probably been in Judea since the beginning of time; it wasn't going to negotiate. It was a final statement to Jesus' death.

Reflection

As we begin this sermon, I would like to invite you to imagine that stone and to consider the power it represents, especially through the eyes of the Easter participants.¹

First, think of the women who went to the tomb early on the first Easter morning, when they wondered who would roll the stone away (Luke 24:2). For the women, the stone represented the depth of grief and despair. After all, all was lost. In Jesus, they had placed their hopes, their love, their faith. They had followed Jesus to the end. They witnessed Jesus tried unjustly, ridiculed shamefully, and executed in public. The stone was a barrier, a barrier between them and their past, in which they believed in Jesus, in themselves, in the power of gentleness, in generosity, in forgiveness. The women believed in joy too; but now the joy was gone. Behind that stone lie their dreams. What they were trying to do on Easter morning, as Luke tells us, was to anoint his body as act of gratitude and devotion, in the face of apparent defeat.

Now, secondly, take a moment to think about the Roman and Judean authorities, and how they viewed the stone. For the people ruling Jerusalem, that heavy and immovable stone represented their power and authority, their being in control. They knew their rule was based on a lie, but they found ways to enforce it.

The Judean leaders like Caiaphas the high priest were Roman appointees. They lived with the daily notion of a foreign country occupying their land. They compromised with Rome's understanding of peace, which really wasn't peace. It was more like a slogan, with one army dominating another army. But living such a lie was a small price to pay for such privileges amongst the ruling class. What Jesus represented, though, was a serious threat to that class.

Therefore, by healing on the Sabbath, by forgiving sins, by cleansing the Temple, by silencing the voices of social revolution – Jesus was a constant reminder of the uneasiness of life in the present. He was a symbol of what could go wrong, and what the rulers needed to do to keep on top of things. Putting Jesus behind a large stone was a reminder that peace could last for one more day.

¹ Thanks to the Reverend Dr. Samuel Wells for insights into this sermon from his own "The Rolling Stones" based on Mark 16:1-9 (April 24, 2011) at Duke university Chapel. There are hundreds of sermons with the title of "The Rolling Stones." Simply Google "The Rolling Stones" sermons and you will see all kinds.

But what about Jesus, the figure at the center of the Easter story? What did the stone mean to him? On Palm Sunday, Jesus was where God and humanity met. Jesus epitomizes the renewal of God's people and the coming of Lord. But five days later, it all unravels. The people turn away, the disciples flee, and on the cross, Jesus is forsaken. He dies utterly alone.

That's what the stone represents to Jesus: his separation from humanity and from his Father: the opposite of what he came to live and teach. It is a contradiction: the stone representing everything that separates Jesus from God and Jesus from humanity and all creation.

But here is the important point to keep in mind: the stone is also part of God's good creation. The bond between the Son and the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, is the most fundamental truth there is, and the coming of Jesus reveals how far God will go to make us friends in this special relationship of the Trinity, in overcoming sin and death.

Indeed, what the stone reveals is that there is nothing more real than what binds us to God: there is nothing, nothing whatsoever, neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, not thing to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation – and certainly not a cumbersome stone – that can separate us from God's love through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:31-38).

Hence, the power of the resurrection!

Therefore, for the women, the stone represents the past, the glorious but failed memory of a dream that died. For the Judean authorities, the stone represented the present, the compromised but merciless control over the people of Israel. And for Jesus, the stone is God's glorious future, a message to the world that nothing can separate us from Christ's love.

It's what the gospel is all about: that every immovable and unshakable obstacle we can think of between us and God; every challenge we face between life and death, is going to find itself on this day the same way as that first stone – rolling, rolling, rolling. That's Easter!

Any Rolling Stones for You?

But let me ask you: what about your stone? What does the stone represent to you? What is standing heavy or immovable in your life? Between you and love? Between you and healing? Between you and God? What kind of slab is weighing heavy on your chest right now? Like the women, are you asking, "Who is going to roll this stone away?"

Is that where you are? Is that where you have been for a long time? Buried under cynicism? Indifference? Self-promotion? Suffering? Hurt? Worry?² I think we all can have feelings like the women on that first Easter morning: we all can ache for a glimpse of glory, a vision of hope.

But I also think, whether we admit it or not, that we are like the Judean authorities too, full of compromises, broken promises, attempts to control. We can so easily buy into half-truths and lies. Here, the stone stifles our imaginations and faith in ways that keep the truth under wraps, to how our lives really could be different.

But let's not forget what the stone represents to Jesus. Let's not forget the story of Jesus' friend Lazarus who was in the ground for four days. And let's not forget Martha's response to Jesus for Jesus being late on the scene and Jesus' answer to Martha about what had just happened, when he says: "Do you want to see the glory of God, or don't you?" It is a question that brings the past, and the present, and the future together.

Indeed, it is a question Jesus is asking today, a question that unravels our habitual grief from the past and dismantles our compromises in the present. It is a question that Easter places before us as a new future: Do we want to see the glory of God, or don't we?

What stones need to roll away? What needs to shift from our past? Is there sadness back there? Broken hearts? Missed opportunities? Bitterness? Old wounds? Are there hurts we can't forget and blessings we can't remember? Easter that is the moment when the stone from our past begins to roll. See it roll!

But what about the present? In what ways have you tried to tame the Lord or keep others at arm's length, even fail in serving Christ? How are you walking away from commitment? How have your dreams turned into more busyness and programmed your life in such a way that there is no more space to imagine life anymore? Indeed, when was the last time you felt peace? Or what about that nagging fear or that sense of worthlessness you feel now?

We all have a stone in our life. Hence the question: "Do you want to see the glory of God, or don't you?" See how God can move that stone, the one weighing you down; take a moment to imagine your life without it. In fact, see how that stone occupies your attention all the time, or keeps creeping into your mind, placing limitations on your energies and resources. Maybe there is something that God is holding before you and you don't want to face it. If so, know that the stone

² Jill Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2022), 145.

is rolling. Easter means that the stone has been rolled away. “Do I want to see the glory of God, or don’t I?”

For it is Easter! Feel the joy of all your grief and folly and fragility and failure roll and feel the wonder of Christ’s resurrection.

Know that the stones of sin and control, of fear, of sadness, of death – have been pushed aside. Know that there is more to the story, and it’s not finished. No, it’s just beginning.

After all, it is Easter.

It is the day of rolling stones!

Amen.