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ROLLING AWAY STONES
4/4/2021 EASTER B Mark 16

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Well, here we are, arriving at the morning of resurrection, following a somber and sober week of remembering the suffering of Jesus as he was betrayed, taken before the law & order folks of his day, turned over to the soldiers for capital punishment with a couple criminals, then buried in a borrowed rock tomb.

The morning of resurrection - talk about unexpected! Nobody, even Jesus' closest friends, disciples or other followers, expected anything but a sealed tomb with a dead body. The women come early, prepared to do burial rituals, wondering how they're going to move the huge stone that was rolled over the tomb entrance. Practical, normal care-taking of the dead - a sad task, but a last act of honor and respect. It was normal women's work in that day, and so they came - Mary the mother of James, Mary of Magdala, and Salome. Jesus had a brother named James, so this Mary may have been Jesus' mother. All through history, women have had practical, earthy, and human tasks of dealing with the mess of babies and childbirth, as well as with illness and death. Touching the dead also made an observant Jewish person ritually unclean for a certain # days, so they knew they were taking that on.

But when they got there, surprisingly, unexpectedly, the stone was already rolled away (!), and an angelic being greeted them and told them Jesus was not there any more, but risen, (whatever that meant), and that he would meet them back home in Galilee. And then these 3 women were commissioned as the first evangelists - the first preachers - they were to carry the news to the disciples, and Peter is mentioned specifically. *(So why do people fight over women preaching???)*

In Mark's telling, the women are totally freaked and can't speak, and run away - not an unrealistic reaction to such news as a dead person being raised, eh? And hearing an angel talking! In the other gospels the women return to the disciples, tell them, **and aren't believed** - and the disciples have to run and see for themselves. In the other gospels, Jesus appears later to other folks, appears and disappears at will, eats fish, is kind of not recognizable, but is later recognized.....

Mark's telling of the Jesus story ends on the note of the women fleeing and scared, not knowing where in Galilee Jesus will meet them, just fleeing back to where they came from, and too freaked to talk about it. Mark, chooses to end his telling of the Jesus story in what feels like

an incomplete way, compared to the others. The oldest surviving manuscripts end here. Why might Mark have done that? What was he wanting to tell us by this ending? It must have been on purpose.

Some think Mark wanted readers like us to sit with just how unexpected and strange the idea of resurrection is, and not take it as an everyday word or event. But, I mean, resurrection IS a weird concept. Here in church we get used to talking about our Risen Savior, and we use the word 'resurrection' pretty easily. But this is an odd concept to most other folks - someone raised from the dead? Really? Over the centuries, more rational reasons for Jesus not being in the tomb have been put forward - that the soldiers were wrong in thinking he died, that he just swooned or went into a coma - and then came to consciousness later and somehow got out of the tomb. A theory put forward at that time was that his followers came and stole his body to try and say he was risen, because Jesus had talked about being raised on the 3rd day, & they wanted to make it look like it actually happened. Nobody, before or since, has been resurrected - we don't know what it means, except that Jesus is alive.

In our era, we're used to stories of near-death experiences and people brought back from the brink – but is that resurrection? I had a New Testament professor in seminary that made us students ponder the difference between being resuscitated, and being. Resurrected (*do this is George's voice, and pronounce the 'c'*). His point, and the point that the Apostle Paul and others will teach, is that at this moment, God does a radically new thing - a new creation, a new kind of life - Jesus is Jesus, but in a new kind of life, a resurrected life, by God's power. After all, God is a God of life and creation, and God created all that is in the first place, out of nothing. So what's so surprising about God creating again?

This is the concept of resurrection that has stayed with me - a whole new creation, done because Jesus was so wholly submitted to God, and that he went the distance without sin, and didn't quit. It doesn't seem to matter that he prayed to be spared - in the end, Jesus said, "Not my will, but yours be done," and stuck with it. Jesus came here out of love, Jesus preached God's word out of love, Jesus taught God's kingdom, God's path out of love; and didn't flinch from the consequences out of love; and stuck with it to the end out of love. Remember his last supper with the disciples? Jesus' last teaching is to hit yet again on that theme of loving one another in a reflection of his own sacrificing love.

We often use butterflies as illustrations of resurrection - the life cycle of creatures like butterflies are symbolic of transformation, change, growth through radically different stages. I'm not sure this is what resurrection actually is, but it's closer than any other illustration in creation. The risen Jesus, in the other gospels, is recognizably human - although able to do things we

normal humans can't, obviously having power over the elements. The apostle Paul calls Jesus the New Adam - as opposed to the Old Adam, which is current humanity, this version of human creation. I certainly don't understand resurrection, so as to explain it in scientific detail. Yet the God we worship is a God of creation, and a God of life, and obviously can do what God intends - that is, to create a whole new spiritual reality, a whole new life. And that life of love is what Jesus offers to us, too.

Going back to Mark's ending - What I like about it, besides it being so authentic as to people's reactions to the idea of the dead raised, is that it's open-ended - not incomplete, but open-ended. It invites us to say, "What's gonna' happen next???" And so it invites us to write the rest of the story ourselves, as we meet the risen Jesus in our own Galilee, our own Jamesville, our own New York, or wherever our homes are. I think Mark is challenging us to encounter the risen Christ ourselves, and see how the story goes on.... See where the work of Christ moves into **OUR** neighborhoods; how this ministry of healing all sorts of human ills and human suffering plays out as **WE** see Jesus with us; how the message of Jesus being alive impacts the way **WE** live in our time and place.

The concept of resurrection is a radically different expectation for humanity to deal with - it brings us face to face with the limits of our understanding and our trust in God. In this story of Jesus being raised, the stone sealing the place of death is rolled away, and new life has emerged. That is a wonderful spiritual metaphor - the places of death in our world are no longer sealed against the power of God's new life. The new life that God is creating is set free in the world. The negative phrase, "That can't happen!" is shown to be untrue - that **CAN** happen! That **DID** happen! Life wins, love wins. New life is always possible - new ways, new thoughts, new understandings - they are all possible in the power of resurrection. The stone that sealed in death and made it the last word, has been rolled away - new life is now the last word.

That's a powerful reality for us. In our own lives, the message of resurrection is that our places of suffering and death are not the last word - we do not have to remain in our addictions, our neuroses, our fears, our angers, our complexes our losses: the stone making them seem impossible to heal is rolled away - new life is a reality. The endless battle against racism in any form, or poverty, or the greed that seems so endemic - these are not written in stone as the last word in human life - the stones have been rolled away from them, too, and new life of kindness, understanding, welcome, embracing of all, saving our planet - in God's power, these are set free to be a new possibility. Brokenness is not eternal - healing is. Sin is not eternal - forgiveness and love are. Death is not eternal - life is.

No matter how bleak things look, no matter how overwhelmingly large problems seem - the message of Easter is that the stone is rolled away, and new life has been set free.

People might say that Christianity is unrealistic with this resurrection idea. Actually, Christianity is a realistic faith - it recognizes human failings and the reality of the human struggle against sin - it doesn't pull any punches about sorrow and pain, and people's failures and foibles. It tells the truth. Yet Christianity is ultimately a faith based in hope and love and life - not pessimistic, however real that seems at times - yet in the story of Jesus Christ, new life is set free in the world through trust in God's promises, through trust in God's love and faithfulness. And not only in this world, but in the larger spiritual reality that encompasses whatever comes after. Christianity is ultimately a path to the vision of healing and wholeness for all humanity and all creation.

And that's why we Christ-followers celebrate resurrection as a central tenet of our faith. At Christmas we celebrate that God's love for us led to Jesus being sent as a human, to walk with us and to do the work for our saving and restoration. At Easter, we celebrate that Jesus fulfilled his calling, and brought the gift of new life, new creation; possibilities of life and love and healing and wholeness for all the world.

THIS is what we are called to preach and teach; THIS is the vision we are called to live into in our daily lives. The call to follow Christ is a high calling, a deep calling, a vital calling for our world - the call to trust God, offer our full self, to be faithful to our message, and stay true to the end. May it be so. Alleluia! AMEN!