

Sermon – Mark 16:1-8
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Grace Lutheran Church
Easter – Year B
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“Roll Away Your Stone”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

1. Who will roll away the stone for us? Who among us hasn't asked that question before? Perhaps not in those words, but with the meaning conveyed. An illness diagnosed, a job lost. A relationship fractured, an addiction with an iron grip. Depression, anxiety, despair. Racism, poverty, terror. Who will roll away the stone for us? And, of course, death – the final stone rolled in front of us and our loved ones; the great immovable truth of life. That we're going to die. Who will roll away the stone for us? I know, I know – this is a bit gloomy for Easter Sunday and April Fools' Day, too. But this is where the story leads us today as we walk with the women – Mary Magdalene, Mary, Salome – to the tomb of their friend, Jesus, who just a few days prior was crushed by the weighty stone of this world's sin and laid in a tomb. Sealed up. But not quite forgotten. The women go, but they go without hope. The most for which they can manage to yearn is to get to Jesus' body so that they may anoint it. But who will roll away the stone for them? It is too heavy; too certain; too final.
2. Perhaps, beneath your Easter bonnets or hidden under the fake grass of your children's Easter baskets, you come here today feeling the weight of the stone. Who will roll it away? And then, simply, as we walk with these women to the tomb, we hear the most unlikely news, no less surprising regardless of how many times we have heard it before: “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” With the

- women, we see that the stone of sin and death that we could never hope to move has been moved for us. Alleluia, Christ is risen!
3. In Mark's seemingly disappointing ending to the gospel story, however, the women don't see Jesus. Not yet, anyway. He's nowhere to be found. And the women, unable to grasp the reality of what has occurred, flee in terror and amazement, saying nothing to anyone – for they were afraid. The end. Happy Easter? Is this all there is? Is there no more of the story to be told? And what about us, the stones that hold us back, that we hide behind, the stony tomb that waits for us? Is there nothing more to be said?
 4. The Sunday school teacher, attempting no doubt to convey the theological fallacy of works righteousness, of saving ourselves by our good deeds, asked his young students the question: "What can I do to get into heaven? If I make a lot of money and have a lot of friends, will that get me there?" "No!" came the response. "What if I'm a good friend who always looks out for others?" "No!" the children cried out. "What if I give all of my time and money to Grace Lutheran Church, will that get me into heaven?" Again, "no!" Trying to make his point, he asks: "What then can I do to get into heaven?" But before he can answer his own question with little-big words like grace and faith, one little girl blurts out, with the wisdom shared by five-year-old kids everywhere, *"You have to be dead!"* Surely you didn't think you'd get of this sermon without hearing a little bit of humor. I mean, Easter doesn't fall on April Fools' Day for another eleven years. I couldn't pass up the opportunity entirely.
 5. And that's just the thing, for Easter is God's response to the stony sin and the rock-solid death in which we live. God's response is a bit of a farce, really; a foolishness. If all we have to bring to the table is our death and sin and everything else that afflicts us, then that's what God will work with to bring about the lark of grace and the newness of life. God, Peter proclaims in Acts,

truly shows no partiality. God will work with the one thing we all have in common: death. And God will use that death in the dying of the Son, the Lamb of God, to bring about new life. Which is where, of course, the joke doesn't go far enough by half. Because this day, this bright Easter morn with its empty tomb and rolled-away stone, isn't about getting to heaven when we die. Don't get me wrong; the promise of eternal life is there, but it's about life after death *before* we die, too. The resurrection of Jesus Christ ushers in the Kingdom of God now, here, today. For you. For you, who are dead in your sin, dead in your despair, dead in the doldrums and depressions of this life. God shows no partiality. You were dead, and now, in Christ, *you're not*. You're alive. God in Christ has swallowed up death forever. In that truth, in faith, by the grace of the living God, everything has changed. Forever.

6. To be sure, after I've finished this sermon, after our last Alleluia has finished echoing through this beautiful space, we'll all return to our lives. It may seem that little has changed. Except that the story doesn't end with terror and silence at the tomb. Jesus is alive, and that means that this world pulses with divine possibility. Jesus, the women are told, has gone on ahead to Galilee. Galilee, the place in which most of Jesus' ministry took place. Galilee, where Jesus forgave sins and cast out demons. Galilee, where Jesus healed the sick and preached a new vision of a love that is stronger than hate and a life that is stronger than death. Galilee, which is this whole world, shot through now with the Christ whom the tomb of death could not hold. We look now for Jesus not in death, but in Galilee, in the sunlit skies of this world dawning with infinite freedom and grace.
7. As it was for the women on that first Easter, the resurrection doesn't change our experience of reality in an instant, at the flip of a switch – *but it does change reality*. For now, now our sickness is contained within the reality that God is making us whole. Now our fear is kept safe in the arms of the God who walks with us. Now our sin is held within the truth that we are already

forgiven and our sins, powerless, are left behind in the tomb. Now our slow struggle against oppression of every kind is contained within the promise that a new Kingdom, heaven and earth coming together, is already here. Now even our death is contained within the sure and certain hope of our own resurrection, won for us in the suffering victory of Jesus Christ. The hope of Easter is not that we will suddenly have the power or wisdom to roll away the stone, but is found in the proclamation heard by the women and heard by us: the stone is already rolled away. Jesus is not here. He has been raised and has burst forth into every corner of creation to unleash healing and hope upon the children of God. All you have to do is be dead. And you were. And now you are not. Christ has claimed you as his own. The life of Easter faith is one of slowly getting used to that fact. All you needed to do was die, to be thrust under the waters of baptism and be brought out anew from your tomb, reborn, already. Right now.

8. Mark, I think, ends his Easter proclamation in just the right place. We're still afraid, uncertain, unsure. But Jesus is none of those things. Jesus is alive. So go forth, friends, and look for him in Galilee, in every corner of your life. Join in on the divine lark by which God has turned death into life. He has rolled away the stone, because Jesus refuses to let anything keep you from the promise of life after death right now. The joke was on death all along, as we, slowly but with suddenly certain footing, walk into the joy of resurrection living. Today. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!