

“Rolling Away the Stone”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 4/12/2020
Text: Mark 16:1-8 at FBC of Newport, NH

//1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.//

—Mark 16:1-8 (NIV)

Here is how it started. Here is how the disciples first learned of the resurrection of Jesus, at least a few of the women disciples who had set out to finish properly burying the body of their Lord. They don't even see Jesus as risen. They see the stone rolled away. They see the tomb empty. Well, not exactly empty. The body is gone, but there is *someone* there, a young man dressed in a robe white enough to mention. He's cause for some alarm.

So he reassures the women not to be afraid. And then he announces the news: ***"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."***

All the Gospels have this prelude to the 40 days of appearances of the risen Jesus. But after this they each chose to have different appearances to share. Matthew speaks of the women meeting with Jesus some time after this angelic announcement. Luke mentions two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus and the apostles meeting Jesus toward evening of that day. John mentions Mary Magdalene as being the very first witness of the resurrected Jesus. But Mark does not go into detail about any of the subsequent appearances. In fact, the earliest copies of the Gospel of Mark end right where today's text ended. The listing of appearances which come after are added later and are like little thumbnail sketches compared to Mark's original emphasis on where it all started in verses 1-8.

Now I love each of the accounts of how Jesus met his despairing disciples and proved to them that he is risen. And we'll hear all about them in the upcoming weeks. But Mark's emphasis is on this essential beginning to it all: the open, empty tomb; the word of the angel within it; and the women running away trembling and bewildered. So today, on this rather odd Easter Sunday, where we

are not able to have our usual celebration of gathering in our Sunday best and singing with our loudest voices, I would like to partner with Mark and emphasize the reality of the resurrection by focusing on this very first event to follow. Before even seeing Jesus, we are to see what these women saw and make of it what we will. Even if there's confusion and fear, it is a beginning. So let's not skip over these eight verse of how it all started.

And the beginning started with the fact that the stone was rolled away. The women were concerned as to just how they were going to get into the tomb. It was so early in the morning there might not be anyone there to help them. Yet when they arrived, the doorway was wide open.

Surely this wasn't for Jesus' sake. Doors, even locked doors were no problem for him. And I doubt it was for the guards whom Matthew mentions and who were there to see it moved. The scene left them looking like dead men. And they ended up reporting to the chief priests and taking a bribe from them to lie about what happened. There was no "fear not" for them, not a single word explaining what happened, and no follow up appearance from Jesus. The being rolled away had another purpose.

This rolling away of the stone was for the women and for those who would come to the open tomb with an open heart toward Jesus—*even as they believed him to be dead!* God made sure they could see inside that tomb. The tomb would not just speak for itself. God also made sure a heavenly messenger was there to spell out exactly what has happened. But the stone and the empty mouth of the tomb had an important part behind the angel's words.

Imagine that angel speaking from outside the tomb, with the stone and Roman seal still over the doorway. He would be saying Jesus was not there; he is risen. But that tomb would be looking a lot like it did when he was buried there. He would be speaking a conflicted message. It would be meaningless, until they might all meet Jesus later in the day. The angel might as well have stayed home. The day of resurrection would be a day without a dawning. It wouldn't really start until the sun was high in the sky.

Dawn is a very important part of the day. It doesn't start with the flip of a switch to the "ON" position. It dawns, showing the light of the sun even before it breaks over the horizon. The darkness, though still fighting on against it, is on the way out. The light has arrived and it's on the way to high noon.

We didn't have a sunrise service this Easter. We aren't even able to gather together at 10:30 for our worship service, except over the phone. It seems we are experiencing a rather odd Easter Sunday. But I want to assure you there's no conflicted message here. The angelic word is loud and clear and the appearance of Christ is assured. Whether you saw the dawn or not, it has come. And there were those who did see it. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was open for inspection—for those with open hearts toward Jesus. Easter has dawned; its light has come; and the noonday is next.