

The Stone Was Moved
(Mark 16:1-8)

Easter 2025
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A Joyous Easter to you, first of all, because of what God has done by raising Jesus and including us in his resurrection! And one of the ways we can appreciate it is by considering the stone that was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb.

All four Gospels mention this stone at the beginning of their versions of the resurrection. It would have been big and hard to budge, not necessarily round, as is often assumed. It was probably more like a boulder; a boulder that Pilate then orders a seal to be put around. It is so stubbornly in place that, the women, on their way to the tomb in the Gospel of Mark, are concerned that they won't be able to move it themselves.

It is pretty clear that the stone is an obstacle for Jesus's followers on their way to discovering that he is not dead, but risen. And so we can understand the stone also as a symbol for the obstacles we face on our way to making the same discovery; the stone (boulder) is an obstacle to our salvation.

That obstacle is something that we have all been confronted with in one way or another.

Fear & Grace

My guess is that the obstacle always boils down, on some level, to fear.

The second verse of “Amazing Grace” suggests to us how this fear comes about and how it comes to pass away. It says, – “*T’was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.*”

The first half of that line expresses how the world God created and gave to us, as an act of grace, is not only wonderful, but also fearsome to us because it is beyond our control. It can be as ferocious and untameable as the hurricanes that wreak havoc on the world around us. And even when it comes to something as close to us as our own inner thoughts and emotions, there is no less cause for fear, because these can also betray us and wreak havoc, and we have less ability to tame them, than we would like to think.

So, this is the world we were born and baptized into; A world that you can drink deeply of *or* drown in. And in such a world, a certain amount of fear, (sometimes, I think “respect” is a better word) is a necessary response. So, we can say, along with the writer of the hymn, that grace has taught our hearts to fear.

But then the second part of that line turns the first part on its head. *“and grace my fears relieved.”* By grace we were made to fear, but by grace our fears are relieved. This second part refers to the resurrection. The same sender of grace that caused us to fear his overwhelming creative power, is the One who’s act of grace relieves our fears.

I think that is what the removing of the stone from the mouth of the tomb is about. It is about our fears “being relieved by grace”; because the taking away of that stubborn obstacle that separates us from the risen Christ, is not our doing. It is God’s doing.

This is true in all four versions of the resurrection story. Three of the four don’t explain how the stone was moved; an explanation that the story seems to demand. So why leave it out? They leave it as a divine mystery. It was there blocking the entrance to the tomb and then it wasn’t! But Matthew’s Gospel, tells us that it was moved by an angel; that it was by divine intervention.

The Comfort in Being Half Alive

It seems to me that part of the reason why the stone before the tomb is so difficult for us mortals to dislodge by our own efforts, is because there is often something in us that doesn't really want it to be moved.

Way back when I was in the Army, I had a friend, a very pleasant guy, who was very self-effacing guy. He thought of himself as someone born to be unlucky. And so he always had a gloomy take on things. Whenever opportunities arose, he was always ready to dismiss them with some explanation for why making an effort would be pointless.

It seemed to me that he was letting everyone know that he preferred to be miserable, even though the possibility of a more dynamic and meaningful life was there to be lived. I think that maybe he wasn't sure whether he could handle it, and that this frightened him. And in a way I understood, because I and I think most of us are a bit like this, although it may be less obvious. Being unhappy and only half-alive becomes familiar and we take comfort in it and are afraid to move into the unknown, even when what we know is destroying us.

Think of the smokers or drinkers or media addicts, who's addictions are killing them. Somehow the endless round of mood swings, the guilt and lack of self-esteem, the highs and the hangovers, bring them a kind of hopeless existence that is comfortable because it is familiar. And their fear of walking without these crutches is like a massive boulder standing between them and the resurrection life.

Or consider those who have been traumatized or mistreated so badly that it is almost impossible to look at the world, without seeing the trauma looking back at them. A deep seated grudge; a lack of faith that there is goodness in the world; an inability to trust; these are great obstacles that stand between us and the resurrected life.

God's Grace in Taking Away

But today is different. Today is a special day for joy, because the stone has been moved and "God's grace has relieved us of our fear."

Usually, when we think about grace, we think of all the things that God makes and provides. God provides us with shelter, food, rain and sunshine, meaningful work, friendships. These are all blessings added. But it is also true that God's grace involves taking things away; even making them disappear.

I think that sometimes we don't think of God as being gracious to us in this way, because we don't think of ourselves as having gained anything, when something disappears.

But very often God removes obstacles that we have pushed and pushed and been unable to budge on our own; obstacles that have kept us imprisoned and only half-alive. And God did it, not because we deserved it, but as an expression of his love for us. And for that we can be extremely joyful!

As I think back on my life and you think back on yours, I bet you can think of moments when a boulder stood between you and life, a boulder that one day just up and disappeared. And you don't know quite how it happened or exactly when. All you know is that it was there and now its gone. Gone is the doom and gloom that came over you whenever you looked at it. And gone is the power it once had to control you and stunt your life. Gone is the struggle and wasted energy over something that was consuming you in a bad way. And you are really happy about it. And it's not so much what you did, it's that God decided it was time to take it away. It is a mysterious act of divine intervention!

The Resurrected Life

And part of what the rolling away of the stone does is restore us to community, because the Risen Jesus is not in the tomb. He has gone to be where others are gathered and he is to be met again in our relationships. Just as Mary, in John's Gospel, rediscovers Jesus when speaking to someone she thinks is the gardener, so it is when we encounter others in the spirit of the resurrection.

The resurrected life becomes the experience of heaven in recognizing how God is present with us through our fellow travellers on the road of life. In all our brokenness, and by the grace of God, we become each other's heavenly treasure as we share in the Resurrection of our Lord.