

## **THE STONE WAS ROLLED AWAY**

Sermon preached by Martha-Jean Fitch  
Easter Sunday April 17, 2022

**TEXT:** Matthew 28:1-10

### Prayer

On Good Friday, Greg began his sermon talking about funeral processions – so today, I am going to begin my sermon by talking about famous burial sites. Let's see if you can identify any of these.

The Taj Mahal was built as a memorial to the favorite wife of one of India's Shahs. The Pantheon in Rome has many famous people buried there, including writer Victor Hugo and artist Raphael. The Green Dome is the burial site of the prophet Muhammed. The pyramids of Giza in Egypt are famous because they contain the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian kings. Arlington Cemetery in Washington D.C. and the tomb of the unknown soldier – commemorating many unidentified soldiers – known but to God. And then I just had to throw this one in – Graceland – where Elvis is buried. (And truly he is buried there!)

All well-known, well-visited cemeteries and mausoleums because of the famous people buried there.

But there is one tomb that is famous not because of what is inside – but because it is empty!!! And that is the garden tomb in Jerusalem!

There you will see a sign that reads “He is not here! He is risen!” and will see the place where they laid Him – empty! And outside, you will see this tomb was cut out of a large stone – and there you will see the trench which would have held the large disc-shaped stone that would have been rolled in front of the entrance and closed the tomb. Looking perhaps like this. These rolling stones would usually weigh more than two tons! And as we heard on Friday night from Greg, it would have been very difficult for someone to move.

All throughout Lent, we have been focusing on rocks. We have seen rocks as “living stones” or the “cornerstone” of our faith and church. But we've also learned that rocks can be stumbling blocks and weapons used to judge and condemn. Last week, we heard that if we don't praise God, the very rocks will cry out! They too will praise the Lord – no matter what the weather is!

And today, the rock is crying out the good news! Jesus is alive! The tomb is empty! And guess what – this rock is also 100% accurate! It will never fail us or deceive us. All we have to do is check the rock!

In fact, this stone that has been rolled away, will really answer a lot of our questions.

Are you wondering if Jesus really is the Son of God? Check the Rock! See the empty tomb! Jesus is alive!

Are you wondering about how to be delivered from the fear and pain of death? Check the Rock! Look into the empty tomb! Jesus is alive!

Are you wondering how to make it through the trials of life? Check the Rock! See the empty tomb! Jesus is alive!

This is the good news we hear as we look back at that first Easter Sunday as recorded in the gospel of Matthew. Open up your Bibles to Matthew 28 and let's take a closer look at this stone that was rolled away. As we begin reading at verse 1, we see that it was very early in the morning, near dawn when Mary and Mary Magdalene came to anoint the dead body of Jesus. Just a couple of days earlier, Jesus had been laid in this tomb – provided by Joseph of Arimathea. How horrible it must have been to see their Lord and Master, Jesus, tortured and crucified on a cruel cross. After his body was removed from the cross and buried in the tomb, Pilate ordered that the tomb be made secure by having a stone rolled in front of the tomb entrance and then it was sealed and guarded. I'm sure as Mary and Mary Magdalene were coming to the tomb, they were filled with grief and sadness – and they wondered, “who will move the stone for us?”

They didn't have to wonder very long because the stone was rolled away by the time they got there. Look at verse 2, we discover that there was a great earthquake, and an angel of the Lord came from heaven and rolled back the stone from the entrance of the tomb and even sat down on the stone. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. It must have been an incredible sight to see.

Now many have wondered why it is important to know that the angel was sitting on the stone. You have any ideas? Some have said that the angel was sitting there waiting for the women to come, so he could show them the empty tomb. Others have said the angel was worn out after pushing back that large, 2-ton stone – and he was resting. (I'm not sure about that one!) The one idea I like comes from a commentary from Matthew Henry that says: *“There he sat, defying all the powers of hell to roll the stone to the grave again. The angel sat as a guard to the grave, having frightened away the enemies' guard; he sat, expecting the women, and ready to give them an account of Jesus's resurrection.”*<sup>1</sup>

Well, we do know that the primary task of an angel is to be a messenger – and that is what happens in the rest of our Scripture today. Look at verse 5:

*<sup>5</sup> Then the angel spoke to the women. “Don't be afraid!” he said. “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. <sup>7</sup> And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you.”*

*<sup>8</sup> The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message. <sup>9</sup> And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."*

The stone was rolled away! Jesus is alive!

Now, why do you think that stone was rolled away? Do you think it was to let Jesus out? Did Jesus need help getting out of the tomb? I don't think so. I think Jesus could have gotten out without that stone being rolled away. Death could not hold Jesus in the grave! And a large stone across the entrance of the tomb did not hold Him there either.

Rather, I think the stone was rolled away for the women. The women could see that the tomb was empty. They needed to see with their own eyes that Jesus was no longer there – He was alive! They truly needed to check out the rock and see the empty tomb so that they could truly grasp the message of Christ's resurrection.

The good news we celebrate today is that the stone was rolled away for us as well! We too need to gaze into the tomb – to find that it is empty and to believe the message that the rock gives us.

And what is that message? What do we see as we look into the tomb?

First, we come to see Jesus for who He really is – our risen Savior! When the women looked into the empty tomb, they turned and ran from the tomb with a mixture of feelings – fear and great joy! And who should they run into but Jesus! The women immediately fell at His feet and worshiped Him. They knew He truly was who He said He was. He was not some imposter or false teacher. He is the living Christ – the Messiah – our Savior and risen Lord! He is the One who deserves our praise and our worship – our commitment and our very hearts.

Our belief in the risen Lord is foundational to who we are as Christians. Most major religions of the world worship some great but *dead* leader or philosopher. Christianity alone declares its faith in a living, resurrected Savior.

There once was a missionary who was explaining this truth to some people. He said, "Imagine I am traveling and have reached a place where the road branches off in two directions. I look for a guide and find two men: One is dead and the other alive. Which of the two should I ask for directions, the dead or the living?" The people responded, "The living." "Then," said the missionary, "why do you follow a leader who is dead instead of Christ, who is alive?"

All but four of the major world religions are based on mere philosophical thoughts and beliefs. The other four are based on a personality rather than a philosophy – and only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder. In 1975 BC, Judaism's founder, Abraham, died. In 483 BC, Buddhist writings say that Buddha died. In 632 AD, Mohammed died. And then in 33 AD, Jesus died – but He came back to life and appeared to 500 people over a period of 40 days! Jesus is alive! He is our Lord and Savior, the very living Son of God.

Are you wondering if Jesus really is the Son of God? Check the Rock! See the empty tomb! Jesus is alive!

What else do we see when we look at the empty tomb? We see the hope we have in facing death! Because Jesus lives, we can have eternal life.

The Apostle Paul seems to say it best in his letter to the church at Rome. There, in Romans 6, we read these words: *“Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer captive to sin’s demands! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ’s sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word.”*

We are the Easter people! We are people of the Resurrection! The glorious, good news of the resurrection is not only that God had the power to raise up His Son, Jesus Christ. It is that God has the power to raise us up now into eternal life. By our faith in the living God, we can also say “Death, where is your victory? Grave, where is your sting? Thanks be to God, we have the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ!

The message of Easter is not there is no death. Every one of us will face death. The message of Easter is that there is life after death.

As we pause and gaze into the empty tomb one more time, what do we see? We see what strength we have to face each day! Because Jesus lives, we can face tomorrow!

Notice in our text today what Jesus’ first words were to Mary and Mary Magdalene after he had been raised from the dead. Look at verse 10. Jesus says to them, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus knew the hearts of the women – He knew that they had fears. He wanted to reassure them – to give them hope and courage to face the days ahead.

And that is the good news Jesus has for each and every one of us. Because of Easter – we can have faith and hope to face the future. Easter makes a difference in how we live life – and also how we face death.

In 1988, when the Berlin wall came tumbling down, a young woman named Anna in East Germany was already asleep when her friend pounded on the door. “Anna, the wall is down, and we have freedom,” she said. “You must come and see!” They ran down to the gate that had divided east and West for 30 years and it was true. The Berlin Wall had been toppled! For three hours they partied on the border. They ran back and forth between East and West, they partied and danced with the soldiers. Then they went back to their homes.

The next morning, Anna awoke and thought she had dreamed but that experience; it all seemed too good to be true. Quickly, she got dressed and ran back down to the border and remembered that it was all true. But this time, before she went back home, she picked up a

shattered piece of the Berlin Wall and took it home with her, a tangible reminder that she was free.

As you leave today, you too will be given a reminder that you are free. A Prayer Pebble marked with various words will be handed to you. Some of the words might be faith or joy or life or forgiveness - believe or even breathe. May these be a reminder that you are released from the shame of your sins free from the punishment of God. Free to be alive!<sup>2</sup>

Maybe when you got up this morning, like the 2 Marys you were just going through the motions of living.... dark shadows marked your path, little passion and less hope...you don't have to go home the same way...the stone is rolled away!

The tomb is still empty, look inside, Jesus is not there. Jesus is alive ...what He said is true...We can have eternal life, joy, peace that passes understanding and a living hope that will never fade or dim.

Do you need hope today? Do you need something to believe in? Then look into the tomb and head down the path that leads to Jesus. He really is the living Son of God, our living Lord and Savior! Look into the empty tomb! He is alive!

Are you struggling with the fear and pain and grief of death? Then look into the tomb and head down the path that leads to Jesus! He has given us the victory over death. Because He lives, we also shall live!

Are you wondering how to make it through the trials of life? Then look into the tomb and head down the path that leads to Jesus! He is alive and He can give you the strength and courage to get through each day and give you hope for tomorrow.

Don't let another Easter come and go without looking into the tomb, seeing Jesus, beholding the Lamb, finding forgiveness and taking hold of the new life that Jesus has called you to live. Today is the day that you need to step forward and make that decision for Christ. Won't you come now – to give your life to Christ and make First Christian Church your church home? Make today a day of new beginnings – a day to live for Christ and truly know His resurrection power. Won't you come now as we stand and sing?

## RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup>“*Why Did the Angel Roll Away the Stone?*” Crosswalk Devotional – quoting a commentary by Matthew Henry. <https://www.crosswalk.com/devotionals/easter-devotionals/easter-devotional-march-28.html>

<sup>2</sup>Steven Molin, *Journey of Stones, A Sermon Series for Lent and Easter*. CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2002.