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Easter Sunday B
Peace, Seattle
April 1, 2018
Mark 16:1-8

THE STONE IS ROLLED AWAY

The call came from my supervising police chaplain a half-hour after the body was found. Would I be available to go to the scene? Yes.

So I called dispatch, got the number of the officer-in-charge, plugged the address into my phone, and headed over to South Park.

The location was two blocks north of the elementary school, on a street lined with industrial buildings and warehouses. But sandwiched between those buildings stood a ramshackle duplex from a bygone era.

Three squad cars and a perimeter marked with yellow tape tell me I'm in the right place. POLICE, the yellow tape reads, DO NOT CROSS.

Inside the home is the sister of the man who'd been found in his car, deceased.
Distraught and in shock, she's comforted by the woman cousin with whom she shares the duplex, along with their four young children. Grief, thick and heavy, blankets the room.

Two men—relatives—are also there; while the deceased man's friend—the one who'd come looking for him and who'd found him in the car—sits stone-faced and silent.

In the face of death, words fail.

The medical examiner arrives, and it soon becomes evident that the cause of death was not natural.
The officer-in-charge calls headquarters—the scene has now become a homicide investigation.
A new set of questions takes center stage, and with this revelation the family's grief grows deeper still.

Outside Jerusalem, working before dawn to prepare spices to anoint Jesus' body, the voices of the women are muted.

An inconsolable emptiness eats away at them; the emptiness that comes to all of us when we realize we've reached the end of the road that we thought would carry us to dreams fulfilled.[1]

> COME FOLLOW ME AND WE'LL CATCH SOME BIG FISH! he'd said.
> WE'LL SEND SATAN AND HIS MINIONS PACKING! he'd said.
> THE KINGDOM'S NEW ECONOMY WILL BE LIKE A MIRACULOUS HARVEST! he'd said.
> THE EDIFICE OF EMPIRE WILL BE DISMANTLED STONE BY STONE!

But that's not how things turned out. The one they'd called LORD, whom they'd followed from Galilee, was summarily executed by the empire, with an assist by his own confused companions.

> "His dreams of a new human order of justice and love have been deferred, perhaps indefinitely, by the Powers that were, that are, and (it appears) ever will be."[2]

[1] See Ched Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), page 410f. He captures the feeling powerfully, I think, and some of his language is reflected in what I have to say.
[2] Ibid, p. 411

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It is a terrible moment, this, when we find ourselves sitting among the ruins of wrecked lives and dead-end dreams with the gnawing conclusion that, after all is said and done, the world CANNOT be transformed.[3]

We know this story line, you and I. Its grooves run deep in our family histories, in our struggles with addiction, in our nation's running battle with racism and violence.

Pushing away, for the moment, these conclusions, and the weariness that comes with them, the women that first Easter morning give themselves to the practical matters at hand.

They could do nothing to save him—but at least they can give him a proper burial!

So they fall into a rhythm with which they're all too familiar—of putting emotions on hold and pulling themselves together for the sake of this last measure of devotion for a loved one—for him.

So immersed in this task have they been that it's only now, at first light, as they make their way to his grave that they wonder aloud: THAT STONE! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT THAT STONE?!

That STONE, you see, embodies their FINAL HUMILIATION. Put there by the authorities; bounded with yellow tape that reads: DO NOT CROSS, it certifies Jesus' defeat, and ensures their separation from him—ours.

It is the IMMOVEABLE OBJECT that stands between our devotion and our ability to express it, [4] bringing the journey of discipleship to a screeching HALT.

BUT OH! DEAR SISTERS AND BROTHERS! THIS MORNING THERE IS ONE MORE MOMENT PREGNANT with possibility—one more SURPRISE!

For when we, with those women, round the bend, when with our eyes we look again at the tomb, we see that THE STONE has already been ROLLED AWAY and the yellow tape scattered.

Rolled away not by our muscle or might, rolled away not by our technology or by any other scheme human minds can conceive.

The rolling away is NOT our doing, but the work of a greater, "ulterior leverage, a force from beyond the bounds of story and history—but with the power to regenerate both." [5]

This journey from death to life isn't something we can engineer on our own, any more than we can will ourselves to rise from the grave. The open tomb is God's doing—a gift from the One whose power to bring life anew is radically free, yet bound in passion to us.[6]

And so a new chapter—a whole new world—opens up where before everything was locked down and sealed shut.

Why are we here today? We're here because the stone was rolled away.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, p. 414
[6] Ibid.

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But rolled away for what purpose? Mark's gospel leaves this an open question.

For after the young man shares the news that Jesus has been raised and will meet them all in Galilee—the women, Mark says, fled from the tomb, [QUOTE] "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Mark captures the essence of this intersection between defeat and surprise and alarm so powerfully in this "unfinished" ending to his gospel.

Resisting the temptation to tie loose ends neatly together, Mark affirms for us that the reality of Jesus' empty tomb takes sorting out.

And the church has been about that sorting ever since Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome made their journey that morning to the tomb.

We will never cease asking the question – What does it mean that the stone was rolled away?

One thing is certain—it cannot mean business as usual. It cannot mean that we go about our lives as if his resurrection never happened. It cannot mean that the possibility of living life truly and fully has been postponed to some indefinite future!

MARK THIS: Resurrection is no feeble promise that "thoughts and prayers" will, eventually, be heard; resurrection is not some symbolic ideal, focused on a heavenly afterlife and disconnected from the real world.

Resurrection is an invitation to live as Jesus lived, to carry ourselves as he carried himself. It is the doorway to a transformed life in which meals are shared with enemies, love is offered with abandon, creation is acknowledged as God's sacred realm; and challenges are issued to any power that seeks to deny it.

Because the stone was rolled away, Jesus is free to wreak holy havoc once more—this time through his Spirit-breathed community of disciples—

- the same ones who left his empty grave in fear and trembling,
- the same ones who deserted and abandoned him,
- the same ones who gather here this morning and in churches and homes, in huts and hovels, by seashores and graveyards around the globe.

He rises up for us and with us—and carries all humanity and all creation with him!

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan and his wife Sarah Sexton Crossan have written a fascinating book just out last month called RESURRECTING EASTER, in which they document resurrection themes captured in the art of both the Eastern and the Western Christian traditions. [7]

After traveling 15 years throughout the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Russia they share their evidence for a more expansive vision of what resurrection—ANASTASIS: UP-RISING—is about.

[7] John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan. *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). See also their article on this topic in the January 31, 2018 edition of *The Christian Century:* https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/rising-christ

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In the Western artistic tradition, they point out, Jesus is depicted emerging from the tomb triumphantly, yes, and magnificently, yes—but utterly alone.

While in Eastern art, Jesus never rises alone. Instead, in the mosaics and frescoes, the icons and sculpted stones of the East, the risen Christ is shown breaking into Hades, tossing aside its bolts and locks, forming its gates into a cross, chaining the guardian of the underworld, and raising Adam and Eve up with him.

The message is clear: Christ's up-rising means liberation for all of us—no one in the long and turbulent history of humankind is left behind!

In the aftermath of this up-rising, the machinery of sin and death has been irrevocably altered, a new Day has begun! Yet this does not mean no loose ends remain!

Instead of leaving us this morning with all loose ends neatly tied together, RESURRECTION leaves us with an unfinished story—and summons us to write the next sentence with our own lives.

Sending us to Galilee, Mark's gospel dares us to trust Christ's promise that he will meet us there: in our daily lives and struggles, among our families and neighbors, strangers and friends.

A glimpse around us this morning tells us that fear is not gone from this world, nor violence, nor unrelenting injustice. But we who have been claimed by Christ dare to live in hope because he who was crucified has been raised, and we now know that the cross is not the end of the story—his or ours.

The risen life we share is not postponed to some indefinite future, its fulfillment begins right here and now as we come to share in this Meal; as we take bread and wine, his body and blood, and become what we eat: the body of Christ for the world.

This is where our lives, our mission begin again.

This is where the God who is in the business of rolling stones away—lives on in me and in you.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, ALLELUIA!

Amen.