

## Staring Down the Stone

Our text for this morning begins on Holy Saturday, the day after the crucifixion and just before the first Easter Sunday. [Read Matthew 27:62-28:10]

“Make it as secure as you can,” Pilate tells the guards. He is rattled, and rightly so. The entire city of Jerusalem is rattled. Matthew tells us that at the moment of Jesus’ death on Friday evening, the earth shook and rocks were split and tombs were opened. Crucifixion was an everyday occurrence, but this was not and is not an everyday crucifixion for many reasons; an earthquake is one of those reasons. It can be hard to secure things after an earthquake, even minor ones. Door jambs are off-kilter; cabinets are in disarray; once smooth roads are suddenly obstacle courses; and aftershocks are a real possibility. So it is understandable that for Pilate, getting the tomb sealed is a matter of utmost importance. Shaken foundations have a way of letting light in. Broken rocks might even allow a bit of breathing room. And that is the very last thing Pilate wants. He’s had a long week fending off rioting crowds and dealing with anxious religious leaders. He wants this Jesus thing settled once and for all; he does not want any cracks to let even the faintest whiff of hope to break in. He does not want anyone to think the empire might not have a firm grip on things, so he sends in reinforcements.

I guess the women are there when the security detail arrives. Matthew does not tell us when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary leave, if they leave. The text simply tells us that they sit and watch on that awful Friday, that they sit opposite the tomb as the shadows lengthen and that they go to see the tomb on Sunday morning, “to see, look at, consider, contemplate” what exactly has happened there.<sup>1</sup> We can assume that they went home and observed the Sabbath in between, but the writer of Matthew seems to want us to know that the women are persistent in their determination to keep vigil, to stay and watch and come back and see and find their way amidst the rubble and the mess. They are determined to keep an eye on the tomb. And at some point the guards show up to do what they can to keep that “imposter,” as the leaders call him, sealed in the tomb, well buried along with any hope of the peoples’ liberation. And the women are there.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3876](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3876)

And whether they camped out all night or whether they just made their way through the mess, the women are there when another earthquake occurs. An angel descends and rolls away the stone, that stone the guards were supposed to keep in place. And in one of my favorite scenes in scripture, Matthew tells us that the guards faint and fall over in fear, while the angel sits on the stone. Maybe my imagination is getting a bit too carried away, but I picture this angel with a huge grin on his face maybe swinging his otherworldly legs like a kid fishing off an out-of-the-way bridge over an unnamed creek. From his perch he says what angels always say, “Do not be afraid.” Because even perched on a stone and wearing a grin, angels are nothing to be trifled with. He tells the women the great good news that Jesus is not there, that he has gone ahead of them as promised. They rush to tell the disciples with a mix of joy and fear and run headlong into Jesus himself. Breathless as we may be to get to the happy ending, I think it matters that we notice that Jesus meets them there. He is not hovering somewhere above it all but here, on earth, in the midst of broken rocks and earthquake rubble. The world around them is broken, but here, even here, life has broken in and broken out. Nothing the guards or the religious elite or Pilate could come up with, no one, nothing on earth could hold back or stop the power of resurrection.

Like many of you, I was struck almost speechless by the scenes of flames engulfing Notre Dame in Paris this past week. I have my Notre Dame story like countless others, so watching the footage of the building glowing and the spire toppling was heartbreaking to watch. It felt like a death of sorts, a harsh reminder that nothing built by human hands is indestructible, that no space, no matter how beloved can stand forever, that no building no matter how sacred or grand is perfectly or permanently safe. And then came the ringing of the bells throughout France and around the world. And the singing. Even as the beauty collapsed before them, people gathered and knelt. Even as the fires raged and sirens wailed in the distance people all over Paris sang hymns praising God.<sup>2</sup>

As you have no doubt heard, other churches have burned of late. While the fire at Notre Dame is believed to have started accidentally, these other church fires have an uglier source. Greater Union Baptist Church and Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas, Louisiana, and St. Mary Baptist in Port Barre were set on fire by an arsonist bent on destroying them. But as the Rev. Harry J. Richard of Greater Union preached at a makeshift gathering last Sunday in Opelousas, “They burned down a building...They didn’t burn down our spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://youtu.be/323MpjYoQxE>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/us/louisiana-black-churches-fires.html>

I keep picturing the Marys as they head into that dark uncertain morning. The ground is broken apart, structures are shaky, everything is toppled, and yet, the women make their way through it all to see the tomb, to stare down the stone that stands between them and their beloved Jesus. Too many of us, too many of you have found yourselves standing on shaky ground of late. Too many of us have found ourselves staring down tombs. We have lost loved ones. Disappointments have piled up around us. Relationships have shattered or simply withered. Racism and hatred and fear and everyday meanness stand guard at every turn. Depression and anxiety have all but convinced us that the stone cannot be moved, that the darkness will win—if it has not already. Pilate seems to have gotten his wish: the tomb seems pretty well secured.

And yet, as the hymn proclaims, “Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb.” Jesus meets the Marys not in some perfectly shiny tucked away shrine, but here, as they make their way through the wreckage of an earthquake and the fallout of an empire that could not maintain its grasp forever. He meets us in waiting rooms and soup kitchens, at bedsides and in courtrooms. This past week he met weeping Parisians on sidewalks and resolute church goers in Louisiana. And this morning, he meets us here.

From the beginning of Matthew’s gospel we are reminded that in Jesus we meet God with us, Immanuel. His family tree includes unfamiliar names and infamous kings and otherwise unwelcome immigrants and outsiders and even a few uppity women. He eats with all the wrong people, makes time for children, describes the kingdom of God with stories that run counter to everything we think we believe to be true, and heals the blind and the lame right under the noses of disapproving authorities. This Jesus dares to insist that God’s mercy is offered to everyone, that God’s justice is more than just a nice idea, and that God’s demand for righteousness means living life with integrity and treating others with decency and kindness. And Jesus dares to declare that the kingdom of heaven is not waiting in a far off dream world or faraway fantasy for a select few, but coming here and now amidst the rubble and the rust heaps for everyone. And it—all of it—gets him killed in the most public and humiliating way his world knows. But even Pilate senses something unsettling is afoot, that the end of the story is not the end after all. Pilate seems to have an inkling that the Empire cannot stop the new life God has in mind. I wonder if maybe the women sense that, too.

I’m guessing many of you have seen the stunning image of the light shining on the cross in the ruins of Notre Dame. In that image many see hope and the promise of the persistence of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, and I do, too. But I also see the power of Jesus’ resurrection on those sidewalks in Paris where hymns of praise linger in the

air alongside the sirens. I see the power of Jesus' resurrection in the undaunted faith of pastors who are leading their people in worship this morning in a borrowed building in Louisiana. I see the power of resurrection in the churches who moved ahead with Easter services and community meals in the wake of bombings in Sri Lanka this morning. I see the power of Christ's resurrection in the courage of two women who make their way through rubble to stare down that tomb. I also see that power here. I see the power of Jesus' resurrection when you cross the sanctuary to shake hands with a stranger or make room in your pew for a restless child. I see the power of resurrection when your faith drives you to ask hard questions about the way God's beloved and broken world works around hunger, housing, racism, and poverty. I see the power of Jesus' resurrection when you sing with tears in your eyes and pray with weariness in your bones.

Pilate is wrong about so much. He puts his faith in a system that finds its strength in occupying foreign lands and oppressing any and all who dare to question the empire. He rides in on a warhorse to threaten and intimidate people longing for freedom. And yet in one instance he is absolutely right. Although he would not admit it out loud, he seems to know that these things cannot last, that even the most menacing stone sealed tight and protected by armed guards cannot stop the new life this Jesus comes to usher in. I think the women know it, too. I think that is why they persist in staring down the tomb. They have been listening to this Jesus all along. They have heard him declare that God's kingdom is coming into this world of broken hearts and rubble-strewn roads. And so they show up on that first Easter morning, to be greeted by a grinning angel who knows it, too and a risen Savior who proves them all right.

On this resurrection morning, I invite you to stare down that stone as the earthquake subsides and notice how and where the light breaks in. I invite you to wonder at the ways you have seen the love of God break the grip of sin and death. And I invite you to let your heart hope and trust the One who makes this outlandish promise here on earth, in the midst of broken hearts and rubble-strewn roads. And if you do not have it in you to go to the tomb, if you cannot find a way to stare down the stone, I want you to hear that we are not godforsaken, that we are in fact beloved, that the bonds of death have been cracked wide open, and that fear, hatred, and evil have not and will not win.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.