

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Daniel 6:1-23; Mark 15:46-16:8

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Who shall roll us away the stone?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The image of the three myrrh-bearing women
Approaching the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus in our Gospel this evening
Is profoundly poignant,
In part because it speaks to experiences with which so many of us
All of us, I think
Are intimately familiar.

Just imagine them, these three women, walking slowly
Together
To the tomb,
To finish the burial rites for their friend and teacher Jesus
That they could not perform on the Sabbath.
I imagine most of the way was silent:
The only sound that of their trudging, the empty wind perhaps, oblivious birdsong.
What could they say, what grief could they express more eloquent than the grief
Already written on their faces, streaming down their cheeks?
How many times do they stop to sob or hold each other as they walk?
And then, the closer they come to the tomb,
The sun rising higher in the sky, a sign their sorrow will not allow them to read,
Who looks into whose face first to say,
“We’re coming all this way, and for what?
For who shall roll us away the stone from the door?”
And yet...
With no answer given, with no answer to give,
They keep walking. Love leading on. They keep walking.

Our Gospel’s Greek suggests that, it’s at this point that they don’t just look.
They look *up*.
And they see, through a veil of tears, something completely, startlingly unimaginable:
The impossibly large stone covering the entrance to the tomb,
Has, impossibly, been rolled away.
Consider not just how astonishing that was to them,

But how overwhelmingly, mindbogglingly strange and
Incomprehensible that would have been to these women.
That stone
Covering that door
Was the last word on their dashed hopes,
The last word
On their Lord, their Life, their Love, Jesus Christ, sealed in death on the other side of it.
It was the full-stop, the period at the end of Jesus' story,
At the end of their own story.
After the events of the previous week
After the betrayal in the garden
After that hideous trial that sent an innocent to death
After the scourging and the mocking and that grotesque thorn crown
After the nailing
After the agonized and agonizing death
After the darkness at noon
After the earthquake
After spear thrust
After the mother's tears as she received her son's lifeless body
After the laying in the borrowed tomb
After the stone rolled over its entrance
After the weight of so much horror
Who could have thought that stone was moveable?
Who could have thought that all the events of the week
Would somehow seem to begin to unravel themselves backward,
With the impossible movement of an impossible stone?
Who could have imagined that death and death's reign would not actually have the last word?
Who could have imagined that Jesus' story was not over,
That that stone wasn't the end of God's story, Love's story?
Who could have imagined such an unimaginable good?
That the God of Life, who died on a cross,
Jesus Christ
Had undone death by his dying
Had trampled it down
Had descended by the ladder of the cross
Into the heart of the grave
Into hell itself
And unpicked it from the inside
Bringing the light of his glory into darkness
Bringing the Limitless Life of his Divine Being
Within the limits of death's domain
And abolishing that domain and its dominion over human life completely;
That he rises again, drawing, through his own perfect humanity
All of humanity, dead and alive, from every age, even from those ages yet to come
Even our age
Drawing them, drawing us, through the magnificent gate of his own heart
To the Deathless Heart of God's own divine life
Leading us, by grace, to the true promised land;
Who could have imagined such a thing?
Who indeed, but the unimaginably Good God?
Everything we thought we knew about life and death
All the hard and stony and horrible facts on which we thought we could rely

With which we thought we could tell our story
With which we thought we could tell *God's* story
They are all undone. Broken. Shattered. Moved aside—
In the face of this unimaginable revelation of the Really Real:
Love is stronger than Death.
That Easter morning, those three women understood:
The hard stony world of death and sorrow and loss they thought they knew was over.
“Be not affrighted” the young man, the angel, tells them when they enter the tomb;
And hearing from the angel of Jesus’ resurrection,
In an instant, they discover themselves in a new world.
They leave a tomb to enter a new life, more startling, more richly grand, more majestic
Than any they could have ever possibly imagined, awestruck and trembling,
Our translation says they were amazed, but the word is more fruitfully translated: ecstasy.
They were transported outside the tomb, outside themselves,
In a wordless rapture of trembling ecstasy
From which one among them, Mary Magdalene, would be the first preacher to the apostles
of the Good News in its fullness.

Beloved, the Good News of Easter, the Good News of Jesus Christ
Means: the world we thought we knew is over.
But do not be afraid, though the world as we know it has ended.
We are invited, through Christ, in the Church, by grace
To be citizens of a new world of joy, of love, of life.

I think many of us, most of us, all of us
Know what it means for hopes or dreams, plans, possibilities
To be crushed by some impossible stone that seals us away into a mournful darkness
From which liberation seems doubtful or fantastical.
We don’t need to think too too hard to name some of the stones that may burden us today:
Addiction, abuse,
Food or housing insecurity,
Economic, racial or gender-based oppression
The parlous state of the world,
Or own past actions,
Our selfishness, our pettiness, our hatefulness, our violence, our viciousness of life,
The pain or fear we would inflict on others so we feel less hurt or afraid,
The cycles and patterns of death into which we are so habitually caught up;
All the things that brick us up into tombs
That hem us in, that foreclose the horizons of our joy, our love, our lives, our humanity
All the things that make joy, love, life seem unimaginable.
And “who shall roll us away the stone from the door?”
We certainly can’t.
It’s easy to forget that the Reality for which we were made
The Reality of love intended for us since before the Foundations of the world
Is the Reality of God’s own life
A life of supernal and endless Joy
A life of complete self-giving, vulnerable, boundary-breaking, death-defying Love.
And there’s nothing you can do to earn it
Nothing at all
There is no price whether in dollars or good deeds that you can pay to buy this joy
It is gratuitously, mercifully, lovingly, yours,
In and through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has entered into the dark places of your life
Jesus Christ has entered into the fearful places of your life
Jesus Christ has entered all the death-filled places of your life
Jesus Christ has seen your sin, knows it,
And he has forgiven it
He shed his blood for you on the cross
Endured the weight of that sin
So that he could return that Easter morning
To tell you:
I love you. I forgive you. I know you. I long for you.
I'm yours, you are mine.
I've taken your sins, and given you my own Life. My Love. My Joy.
Who roll your stone away? I will, says our Lord.
If you let me.
And I will lead you out of darkness into a brightness of grace
And empower you to live the life of Love and Joy I give you.
Transformed by grace,
You will be empowered to do all such good works as I have prepared for you to walk in,
Says our Lord,
And become agents, instruments and evangelists of the new world of grace I am creating
even now.

Beloved, wherever you are in your life
In your journey of faith
In whatever darkness you may find yourself,
Among whatever lions of wrath or envy or fear or guilt or shame,
Sealed in and pressed down by whatever unimaginably impossibly immovable stone,
That stone does not need to be the last word for you.
The grace of God longs to lift up your eyes to see your redemption near at hand in Christ Jesus,
Rolling the stone away from your door,
Dawning like the Daystar in your life,
Unimaginably bright,
Scattering the darkness
Vanquishing sin and death
Lovingly reaching out for you with nail-pierced hands
To draw you out of the grave and into a new life of joy,
A resurrection life.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

May we show forth in our lives what we profess with our lips.
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.