

Easter Morning, 2009  
Sermon by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld  
Grace Church, Amherst  
12 April 2009

**Texts:**

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 118

Acts 10:34-43

Mark 16:1-8

“Who will roll away the stone for us...?”

Who will roll the stone away for us, for you and me? What stone, what large boulders, rocks, and obstacles stand between you and the life you are meant to live?

This morning we hear about this mysterious man, sitting in the tomb, dressed in white. Interpreters of this gospel get this wrong, including the artist who painted the fresco on the cover of the bulletin. There is something in us that can't believe that a mere human being can receive the power of the resurrection. It's just too much. So artists want to give that human being wings and make him an angel. But Mark does not say it was an angel, but a young man, a human being, one of us, who is sitting there in the tomb waiting to tell the great news. The women arrive wondering how they can treat and anoint the body of their Lord if the stone isn't going to be removed for them. But to their surprise, the stone has already been moved away. By whom? Could it have been by the this young man? “Can't be. No way,” says our doubtful and suspicious minds. But what if he had help? Or could have something so powerful happened to him that he had the power of Christ working in him. When was the last time you felt that you were forgiven, accepted, loved to the very core of your being, the awareness of your frailty and shame having been removed? Think of when you shared a word, a deliberate word of forgiveness and reconciliation to someone who needed it. Think of when you received such a word. Did not things seem incredibly lighter all of a sudden?

We come here this morning, as we do every Easter morning, but perhaps this year with an even great sense of heaviness, wondering, hoping, that somehow that we might get freed to live the life that in the depths of our hearts we know God has created us to be. We imagine a world that could be free from so much pain, suffering, injustice and injury, and to borrow the phrase from the traditional confession: “the burden is intolerable.” What is that life, who is that person, within you that is just longing, aching, perhaps even dying,

to come out, but is just weighed down by the inertia of your history. Easter Day is the day we all rejoice, without shame, without all the encrustations of self-doubt, remorse...without all the regrets of I woulda coulda shouldas. We are told the promise, yet again, to break out, come out, be the human being, wonderfully made and yet even more wonderfully restored in the image of God, an image, an essence that is powerful, free, full of light, truth, and joy, and created to proclaim and embody that life to the world. What is the stone that blocks your way. Today it is our unfettered joy and our happy duty to say that it is being pushed aside.

Easter is not the day when the church says to you, "Get a life!" Because we already have a life, glorious, radiant, stunningly beautiful in its uniqueness. Imagine your life's beauty as being released by Christ, the Artist of Life. Think of Michelangelo who believed that the exquisite forms of his David and the Mary and Christ of his Pieta were already encased in the marble. His job as artist was simply to chip off the excess stone to reveal, disclose, uncover and release the hidden beauty that lay within the block. So it is with our lives, except we are not static piece of sculpture of living, breathing, moving human being, in God's eyes, utterly human and utterly beautiful. According to a traditional text read on Easter Day: *Your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Christ in glory.*

Who will remove the stones from your life, the stones of your regret, the stone of your awareness of sin, of limitation, of mortality, of failure, of sickness. Who will help you out of your tomb? That's the work of the Church, and with some sadness I regret we too often forget that holy calling. We need Easter, and our weekly celebrations of the Resurrection to remind us, who we are and what we are becoming.

So if you are here today for the first time, or after an absence, come help us break out of our stoney tombs. Join us in removing the many boulders that too often keep us stuck inside here and not in the world, healing and restoring it. And if you do join us in sharing this powerful work with Christ, we promise to help you roll away what ever stones impede your life as well. Because, chances are, we know those heavy stones, too. Debt, addiction, disease, despair, disdain, death. Nothing can separate us from the love and the life of God. And because of this glorious day, nothing will.

Christ tells us earlier in Mark's gospel, "If you have faith in God, we can move mountains," much less boulders from tombs. And even more wondrously than moving such masses, dwelling in the power of Christ, we can remove sins and and the inertia of our lives. It's not by accident that the young person sitting on the tomb sits there with a huge stone removed, is most likely the same person whose shameful abandonment of Jesus at his arrest is forgiven. The one who ran away naked and ashamed the Garden of Gethsemane

is now seen released from his sins, and is even privileged in having had an early meeting with the Risen Christ. Now this person sits, one the right (a symbol of being favored) robed in white, as though for his baptism, and his own way out of the tomb is made free and clear. So it is for you and me. Amazing. And at the same time, how scary, since who of us wouldn't on some level just want to stay where we are, exactly where we are, comfortably numb, and stuck.

We don't have to look very far to see the boulders that are already moving when we work in the power of Christ's resurrection: the boulders of racial hatred and fear that block the way to justice, the symbolic and physical stones hurled at gays and lesbians, the seemingly immovable stones that separate relations between economic classes. Imagine the power to be unleashed when we see our work to heal the earth, to feed the poor, to empower education in the developing world, to save the broken heartened and the victims of war and abuse not as something we ourselves have to do out of guilty obligation. Guilt is a paltry and poor source of power. Its got nasty fumes. When we feel in our veins and in our hearts the force of God's love...well that's limitless and everrenewing. That power of love gets replenished everytime we come together in prayer and thanksgiving. This is the power that we harness today when we make offerings to support the mission of a hospital in the Congo that treats women and girls who have been the victims of terrible physical abuse as a result of the war in the Congo, when we give our support for our partners at the small school, St. Mathieu de Bayonais in Haiti, and to support the economic recovery of Leitnhom, a small villiage in Southern Sudan that has been racked by over 20 years of civile war. and to support for the many other ways we claim to be the risen Christ here at Grace Church. Face it, most, not all, but most, even in these times of us can stand to be a little poorer if it means applying our shoulders against the boulders of affluence so we can come to know the infinite riches of God's care for us.

Whoever we are, in whatever station of life we find ourselves, as a result of this day we are more than the world wants us to think we are. Our lives are more than being enclosed and stuck in the tombs of death, decay, despair and decadence. As a result of this glorious morning we are called into a new life. And that life is holy, filled with the power of the Spirit. Hear the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, whose powerfully addressed by radio the oppressed people of El Salvador before he was martyred in 1980.

How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their work, their job, is a priestly work, that just as I celebrate Mass at the altar, so each carpenter celebrates Mass at the workbench, and each metalworker, each professional, each doctor at the scalpel, the market woman at her stand, are performing a priestly office! How many cabdrivers, I know, listen to this message

there in their cabs; you are a priest at the wheel, my friend, if you work with honesty, consecrating that taxi of yours to God, bearing a message of peace and love to the passengers who ride in your cab.

In the same spirit, may there be no obstacle between your work, your studies, your homemaking, your community building, and the holiness of God's presence.

Today, we will baptize Bryce, Trudie and Evelyn. Who will push such stones out of the way for the children we will baptize into Christ this morning? Who will lead them as they grow up into the beautiful days of Romero's vision when they see all their life as cast in Easter light?

Who will? We will, with God's help. When Anne asks us in this congregation: "Will you do all in your power to uphold these persons in their life in Christ? Our answer is not to be muted or timorous. But let our answer come out of the place in the soul where Christ's power shakes the foundations of our being and moves large stones out of the way. Let our response will be strong enough to move mountains, because they will need power of such love in their rock-strewn course through this world. And may they know, every day of their lives that they have nothing to fear. For they will be clothed with power from on high. The light of Christ, radiant and strong, shines within them, scattering all shadows, all boulders, from before their path to glory.