

First Baptist Church of Augusta  
Mark 16:1-8  
*Passing Stones One Sunday Morning*  
April 12, 2009  
Easter 2009

NRS Mark 16:1 *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He **has been raised; he is not here.** Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that **he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.**" 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

The title of this morning's sermon is, "Passing Stones One Sunday Morning." I recognize that this title is a bit, well, impolite. This is Easter, and you would think I would have a bit more sensitivity regarding sermon titles. Furthermore, while I have never had kidney stones, my wife has, and she tells me that there is nothing funny about it. "More painful than having children." She says, "at least with childbirth you know it will end and something good may come from it." Such a title, no doubt, conjures painful memories for many of you, and so, you are right to say, why bring it up in church, on Sunday, on *Easter Sunday*? Passing stones is serious and painful.

It should be pointed out, that on that first Easter morning the day started out *painfully*. The women went to the tomb of Jesus with the pain of grief and fully prepared to anoint a dead man in burial. From their standpoint the air was rife with death. Jesus was not the only one they thought dead. Their hopes had died that Friday. Their dreams had died that Friday. Their beliefs had died that Friday. Friday was a bloody day of death on the cross, and in the hearts and minds of many.

Let us make no mistake about it, that first Easter started out painfully and now these women were wondering how in the world they were going to pass the stone Sunday morning, this big stone that covered the tomb. It more than likely was fitted into a groove perpendicular to the entrance of the tomb and was intended to seal what was in from coming out and what was out from coming in. Of course, once inside, they would then face the decaying body of a good man whom it was believed was the Son of God, and in response, the world had put him to death. That first Easter morning they felt not only the pain of death, but with the painful fear, that maybe God had simply given up.

Several years ago, in a former pastorate, there was a misprint in the church's newsletter. It was one of those misprints that you church members love to see. It was in a small section that included information about the Easter worship services. There was a listing of the text of scripture to be read and the title of the message I was to preach. In this same section, the Minister of Music listed the choral anthem that the Choir would sing: "The Lord Reigns." That is what they were prepared to sing anyway. Instead of "The Lord Reigns," however, it read, "***The Lord Resigns.***"

Maybe that is closer to the truth of our fears with God. We are afraid that God will one day give up on us. I suppose that partly explains the fascination many have with the end of times: one day God will give up. Maybe that was what was going through the minds of those women in pain early on Sunday morning so long ago. "Who will roll away the stone?" is not so much a prayer, as it is a painfully veiled fear. All they could see

was the stone that separated the living from the dead, but like the disciples, never really saw, or at least understood, all this resurrection talk. They heard it, but they never really understood it. We should not be too harsh on them. We are, after all, not much different. We hear all the time of what it means to walk in new life with Jesus. We hear it, but those “stones” get in the way and we just can’t manage to pass them. And we wonder as we wander to the tombs, if instead of finding a stone rolled away, we find a resignation letter from God saying, “I give up on you.”

Who could blame God? If you would write God a letter between Good Friday and Easter morning, what would you say? My letter might say something like this:

Dear God, it’s me,

I realize that you may wonder who “me” is, because I don’t really talk to you as much as I should, and when I do, it is usually because I want or need something. I guess today is not much different. I just wanted to write to you and say *don’t give up on us*.

Just this past week I have been reading in the paper the same version of a story we have been hearing for months: corporate greed, resulting in massive economic hemorrhaging. People are losing their jobs while some CEO’s are making millions. We know that the Bible warns us about all kinds of greed, but, well, all we can ask is, *Don’t give up on us*.

Dear God, there is also all these wars going on. One of our own from this church is a patient at Walter Reed with a leg shattered to pieces. But it is not just the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan – but political war in Zimbabwe; genocide in Darfur; starvation in North Korea... *God, don’t give up on us*.

Our lakes are polluted and this summer the air will be putrid with smog and the roadways filthy with garbage. There are spouses that have been unfaithful and parents who have been unloving. There are employees who have been embezzling and friends who have been lying. There are some who are thinking about taking their own life and there are some who can’t see their way out of depression. God the world is a mess, and we are too, but *please, don’t give up on us*.

Sincerely, one who is worried about the stone over the tomb.

If I were to write a letter it would sound something like that. But then again I should remember that God has already responded to our fears of God’s resignation, God giving up on us. In fact, we read about it this morning.

When the women come to the tomb, convinced that God had given up, the stone was rolled away and instead of finding a resignation letter from God, the women find a tomb all empty, except for one angel, who simply said: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. *He has been raised; he is not here.*”

At this point, the story gets a bit odd. After discovering for themselves and hearing the testimony of one of God’s angels, the women *still* depart in fear. It ends where you and I so often find ourselves - afraid.

“...for they were afraid,” is the last thing we read in this section. You see Mary Magdalene and the others went to the tomb, because earlier this week, Jesus had been killed. *Earlier this week*, their hope died as well. We know full well how the events in our own life – *earlier this week* – can still numb us with fear. We can talk all we want about Jesus being raised from the dead, but it is what happens to us earlier this week that still leaves us afraid.

*Earlier this week* a parent grows disappointed and disheartened by their adult child.

*Earlier this week* someone’s paycheck was cut in half.

*Earlier this week* a doctor’s report comes in with frightening news.

*Earlier this week* a spouse heard the words “I don’t love you anymore.”

“Earlier this week someone’s hope was crucified.” (adapted from Christian Century, p. 16, March 2002)

Easter Resurrection was the last thing Mary and the others were expecting, because they knew what happened *earlier this week*. They were expecting a resignation letter. No wonder they left in fear. No wonder so many of us leave here afraid. Afraid, that all this God-talk is just that, a bunch of talk. Afraid that our faith, be it strong or weak, is for naught. Afraid, that when our time of death comes, when the light goes out, it’s out for good...Afraid, to trust that God really is in control of this world, that so often seems out of control...Afraid, that the Gospel has little to say in the face of this morning’s paralyzing fears.

And so, Mark ends the gospel with them leaving in fear. As typical with much of Mark’s gospel, the resurrection account is no-nonsense. There are no appearance stories, no empirical evidence that Jesus was resurrected, *except for this big old stone that has been rolled aside*. All the reader has to go on is an empty tomb. And so, it is for us. We want from God, signs, voices, revelations, and epiphanies. Instead, we have a story, and according to Mark, a story that leaves us hanging. How will you complete the story? How will you respond to the news?

Throughout the year, some of us will respond by faithfully coming to church, worshiping, studying scripture, and so on. But like the women, still leave with a sense of anxiety. And for some of you, Easter is one of only a few times you come to church – outside of funerals and weddings. But all of us here are more alike than we think. We hear this message this morning to complete the story.

Mark’s ending lacks eloquence. We want more drama, more music, more closure and directives from Jesus himself. But that is not the point of resurrection. That is not the point of Easter. **We** are to complete the story. Where will *we* go?

Listen to what the angel says: “...*he is going ahead of you.*” You want to experience Jesus, go then to where Jesus will be. For the disciples it was Galilee. And where is Jesus today? Where are the Galilees of the nations and the Galilees of our daily lives? Look where there is poverty – poverty of soul, as well as poverty of riches. Look where there is hurt and pain. Look to the jails. Look to the hungry. Look to the powerless. Look to the neighbor. Look to the places of death, where the stone and the world have sealed it up for good. These are some of the clues the gospels give us, about where we can find Jesus, and how we can experience resurrection.

Where will you go to experience resurrection? This Easter, I invite you to expect Jesus. Not just today, but every day. Not just in church, but every place. He is going ahead of you. He is a Messiah on the move...The Go-Ahead-God...the Savior at large...the One who refuses to resign – even when we have given up ourselves. God goes ahead, not only to prepare the way, but to sustain the way. It is reveille! The call to wake up and rise!

I read of a soldier who made a last request concerning his military burial. He wrote: “When I die, do not sound taps, the traditional final salute, over my grave, but reveille, the morning call, the summons to rise.”

May it be said of each of us, when hope is crucified and dreams are dashed, and we worry that God has resigned from our lives. Let’s not play Taps over our condition, but may we hear the summons from God, like a trumpeter arousing the troops from slumber, and calling them to duty. Holy Reveille!

Arise people of God, because this Jesus is going on ahead of you, and there is no place we will go that God has not been. Jesus can’t be nailed down, shut down, “tomed” up, or stoned out. Jesus is recession proof and positively redeeming. Jesus goes ahead of our darkest fears, our defeating wounds, and our deepest longings. Jesus goes ahead of our doubts and our despair. Jesus goes ahead of the broken world and broken lives. We cannot outrun him, out love him, out-size him, or be without him. The women may have given up, the

men may have given in, society may have given out, but Easter morning reminds us, that while we are worrying about passing stones that block our way, God has gone ahead and is waiting for us to catch up and to see, be and live the resurrection.

Archimedes said, “give me a lever and a place to stand and I will move the world.”

Easter says, just give us Jesus and our life can change, our church can change, our city can change, our world can change. God has gone on ahead and there is no point in waiting here. The stone has passed. The morning call has been issued, and the summons is to rise!