

WHICH ROCK NEEDS ROLLING?

Mark 16:1-8

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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PROLOGUE

To paraphrase Warren Wiersbe:

Because of Good Friday we can look back without shame. Because of Easter we can look ahead without fear.

SCRIPTURE

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 (Mark 16:1-8 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Jesus had been crucified. Crucifixion was the most painful and degrading form of capital punishment in the ancient world, and provoked the most distressing outbursts from the families of the victims, to say nothing of the horrendous toll it took on the victims themselves. A person crucified in Jesus' day was first of all beaten with a whip consisting of leather straps with a piece of metal or bone attached to the end of each strap. Every lash would literally remove chunks of flesh from the back. This was designed to hasten death and some who were condemned never survived this terrible ordeal of the whip.

After the beating, the victim was forced to bear the crossbeam to the place of execution. At the site the prisoner was stripped and then tied or nailed to the crossbeam. The nail would be driven through the wrist rather than the palm, since the smaller bones of the hand could not support the weight of the body. In the ancient Near East the wrist was considered to be part of the hand. The beam with the body was then lifted and tied to the already affixed upright pole. Finally, the feet were tied or nailed to the post. The cross was not high off the ground

(contrary to how it is often depicted in paintings and movies), and left the victim vulnerable to the abuses of animals and degenerates.

Crucifixion generally killed by asphyxiation as it became harder and harder to pull one's frame up on the crossbeam in order to breathe. Death could also be caused by the loss of blood circulation or coronary failure. Whatever the cause, the result was always the same and Jesus was no exception. He was dead.

The Romans had no qualms about leaving the bodies of the condemned on the crosses, days after they had succumbed to death. But out of religious conviction regarding corpses as well as practical consideration for the climate, the ancient Jews of Palestine buried their dead as soon as possible, even those that had been executed as criminals. The burial of Jesus was hastened even more because he died just before the start of the Sabbath when no work, not even funeral work, was allowed to be done. His body would likely have been placed in an ordinary plot in the ground except that it was claimed by a man known as Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and respected leader who secretly admired Jesus. He had Jesus placed in his own family tomb - a man-made cave that could hold the remains of several persons but had not yet been used. Such a tomb would be closed up with a rock that was chiseled into the shape of a large flat disk. The rock would be rolled down a v-shaped trough perpendicular to the front of the entrance of the tomb. These rocks were so heavy that they frequently required several men to roll them away.

By tradition, the nearest of kin would remain home mourning for seven days; Mary Magdalene, who would have grieved as much as the family, might have remained inside had it not been necessary to complete the burial work left unfinished due to the Sabbath (John 19:42). She and two other women headed out very early on the morning after the Sabbath. The one flaw in their plan was that they had no idea how the rock in front of the tomb was going to get moved. The three of them were certainly not up to the task and they knew it. But to their great surprise upon arrival, they discovered that the rock they had worried about was not the rock that needed rolling.

1. THE ROCK OF WRONG ASSUMPTIONS: NOT SEEING THE TRUTH

Instead they had a rock of wrong assumptions that needed to be moved. They went to the tomb looking for someone who was dead and buried. And because of that they almost missed Jesus who was alive and well. Even after the three-fold surprise of the rock that was rolled, the tomb that was empty, and the presence of angels, Mary still thought she was looking for a corpse. Even when she bumped into Jesus later on she assumed he had to be the gardener (Who else?) and asked him where he moved the body (John 20:15). Wrong assumptions kept Mary from seeing the truth. Wrong assumptions can keep you from seeing the truth.

Look at the sign on the inside of the bookmark attached to your worship bulletin (see also below). What does it say?



Illustration No. 1

Most people who read this sign for the first time claim it says, “I love Paris in the springtime.” But, in fact, that is not what it says. Look again. The word “the” appears twice. The sign says, “I love Paris in the the springtime.” We overlook what is really there because we assume we know what it is supposed to say. When our assumptions keep us from the truth about a word puzzle that is amusing. When our assumptions keep us from the truth about life that is tragic.

Ever since the days of Mary Magdalene, people have brought their assumptions to Easter. What assumptions do you bring this morning? Do you assume the bones of Jesus are still in Palestine? Do you assume Easter is a nice tradition but not something an intelligent person can take seriously? Do you assume there really is a God but he would certainly not be interested in the likes of you? You may hold one or more of these assumptions, all of which are wrong ,and any of which can be an obstacle to genuine faith.

Roll away the rock of wrong assumptions and find the truth. Jesus is alive. He is with us now. He wants you to know and trust him. By knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection you can experience the forgiveness of all your sins, friendship with God, a life worth living, and in the world to come, life everlasting.

2. THE ROCK OF STUBBORN PRIDE: NOT ACCEPTING THE TRUTH

Wrong assumptions can keep us from seeing the truth. But sometimes even after we have arrived at the truth we still do not want to accept it. The issue is not, “I can’t believe,” but “I won’t believe.” Our pride becomes a rock that blocks our way.

A big part of the problem is that we are reluctant to admit our errors and our ignorance. A young pastor was asked by a funeral director to hold a grave side service for a homeless man.

The funeral was to be held at a rural cemetery with unmarked graves. He was unfamiliar with the area, got lost, but refused to stop and ask for directions. He arrived an hour late. He saw the back hoe and the crew, who were eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. He apologized to the workers for his tardiness and assured the workers that he wouldn't hold them up for long. The workers gathered around in respectful silence as the pastor did what he thought was an inspiring service, considering the circumstances. He closed with a prayer and walked to his car. As he was opening the door, he overheard one of the workers saying to another, "I ain't seen anything like that before and I've been puttin' in septic tanks for twenty-five years!"

Pride is the chief of sins. It keeps us from admitting our errors and our ignorance. It can keep us from admitting our need for God.

To be sure, the English word "pride" has more than one meaning. It can refer to self-respect and there is nothing wrong with that. It can refer to a joyful satisfaction in someone else's accomplishments such as your son or daughter and there is nothing wrong with that. But the Bible uses pride to mean an arrogant selfishness.

In his later years, the Hebrew patriarch Isaac wanted to go his own way and not God's way. He put his own pride before obedience to God. Sadly, he drifted further and further away from God. Near the end of his life he was more interested in the occult than the faith of his father, Abraham. His own pride had led him in this direction. The Bible says:

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov 16:18 NRSV).

Pride can stand in the way of faith in Jesus Christ. There are people who hold to the opinion that Jesus was merely an ancient religious teacher and nothing more and no amount of object data to the contrary can ever change their minds. They remind me of the professor in Alfred Hitchcock's film, *The Lady Vanishes*, upon being confronted with evidence that proves his theory wrong, replies, "Nonsense. My theory is perfectly correct. It is the facts that are misleading."

But the facts concerning Jesus Christ are not misleading. They lead to the inescapable conclusion that he is who he claimed to be – the very Son of God. Who do you know in history who has said, "My enemies are going to kill me but within three days I will be seen alive again" and actually pull it off? Only one! And until someone else comes along and duplicates what Jesus did I'm banking on him being the one we need to follow. The sooner we can roll away the rock of stubborn pride the sooner we can believe in this truth.

3. THE ROCK OF A CLOSED HEART: NOT LIVING THE TRUTH

But it is possible to accept something as true without embracing it as something to be lived.

Mark ends his Gospel by telling us that the women ran away in “terror and amazement.” We know from the other Gospels that it took awhile before their private experience at the tomb, which they kept to themselves, got changed into a living faith that would witness to others. This was the final rock that needed to be rolled in order for them to see, accept and live the truth.

According to Harper’s Index, 52% of non-Christians living in America believe that Jesus rose from the dead. They accept this as true but it does not affect how they live. It is filed away in the mind but never finds its way to the heart.

It seems to me there are many professing Christians who are not much different. They believe Jesus rose from the dead 2,000 years ago but are closed to the implications of his being alive today. They have their private beliefs but not a living faith. The rock in front of their hearts has not yet been rolled away. Is there such a rock in front of your heart?

CONCLUSION

When the women went to the tomb their biggest question was, “Who *will* move the rock?” When they left the tomb their question became, “Who *did* move the rock?” Only when it dawned on them that the same power which had raised Jesus from the dead was the power that had moved the rock in front of the tomb, did the rest of their rocks get rolled. Wrong assumptions, stubborn pride and closed hearts were rolled aside not by willpower, not by attempting to be more religious, not by trying to do enough good deeds, but by the grace-filled, life transforming, extravagantly loving power of God!

This is still true today. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he is alive today, ready to enter and change for the better those who invite him into their lives. To do this you need to ask God to remove the obstacles that keep you from seeing, accepting and living the truth concerning Jesus Christ. But be prepared for the results. Your life will never be the same. The power of the Rock which never rolls is more than enough to rock your world.