

## ***John 20:1-18- Preached on Easter Sunday, 2008***

**20***Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

<sup>11</sup>*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

It must have been frightening to see the angel sitting on that rolled-away stone at Jesus’ tomb. What would you have done if you had been there? To plan on going to visit the grave of your beloved friend and savior, only to encounter an earthquake, and then to find an angel, in dazzling white, sitting on the stone that covered Jesus’ tomb? And to see that the stone has been rolled away?

No wonder the guards froze in their tracks. No wonder they became like frozen people. They were supposed to be guarding that tomb. They were supposed to be watching it so that no one would come and steal Jesus’ body and say that he had magically risen from the dead.

It must have been frightening so see that angel sitting there, on top of that stone. I wonder if he was sitting there, with his arms crossed, with a smug smile on his face...kind of like an expression that says, “I told you so...Jesus HAS defeated death.” Or maybe his expression was one of awe and reverence...one that said, “Jesus really HAS risen.” Maybe his arms were outstretched, and he was completely amazed by the events that had just taken place.

Or maybe the angel is laughing. He rolled back the stone, sat right down as though the stone were a bench in the park. I can almost hear the angel laughing and saying, “Do you see this stone? This great stone was rolled in place to close the tomb. This stone not only closed the tomb but also was sealed by soldiers. This great stone was a sign of finality, earthly authority, power and death. Look! I’m sitting on the stone, and the tomb is empty!!”

To sit on something is to have no fear of it. Children will often sit on their animal companions, much to the chagrin of their animals. But when a child does that, he or she does not have any fear of that animal.

And on tv, oftentimes in cartoons or other shows, the victor will usually sit on the opponent that he or she has just defeated. In the old cartoon series, Tom and Jerry, many episodes feature the little mouse, Jerry, somehow getting out of the grip of Tom, the cat. I remember episodes ending where Jerry would be sitting on top of Tom, and Tom having this disgusted, defeated look on his face. To sit on something is to have no fear of it.

The angel sits there, in gleaming white, on top of a stone that is supposed to mean death, finality, sorrow.

And now that stone means something completely different. That stone becomes a symbol of new life. Of resurrection. Of death being defeated.

Jesus Christ changed the meaning of what stones mean. The angel rolled that stone away, but Jesus is the one who was raised from the dead. The angel sat on that stone, but Jesus Christ is the one who sat on death and the grave.

The stone is no longer feared. NOW we know that stones are not symbols of death, but symbols of life. And each one of us has our own stones...stones that have not yet experienced resurrection. What are some of the stones in your life?

Fear of the future? Depression? Anxiety? Grief? Worry? Harsh words spoken to you? A friend’s anger? A spouse’s betrayal? Your own failure? Hear this promise...Jesus will roll those stones away. Maybe not this moment. But soon. The resurrection promise is for each one of us. Jesus rolled that stone away FOR YOU.

And what happened after the stone was rolled away is the most magnificent, beautiful, graceful thing that has ever happened in our world. God raised Jesus from the dead.

Not for himself...but for us. FOR YOU. Your stones...those things that you carry so heavily inside of you...are no match for the resurrection. Stones were never a match for God.

There is a poem that I refer back to time and again when I need reassurance in my own life. It is called “Stepping Stones” and it goes like this:

“Each breath a stepping stone to God. These words have made a home in my heart. I feel the river swirling around me, and I stand on the stepping stone. The river is wide, so wide that I cannot see the other shore. The water is clear and wild, full of unseen currents and unexpected rapids. But I feel at home in the river.

Behind me on the riverbank is my little home, a stone-built cottage that keeps me warm and safe. My cottage is my kingdom, a place to return to when the river runs too wild. There is something disconcerting in the view out over the water. What had seemed like a journey of adventure when I began is not all that I thought it would be.

There is no way forward. I am standing here in the water on the one and only stone. All I can do is stand here. There is a line of stones left behind me, but I don't want to go back. Truly, I don't want to go back.

For a moment I feel a wave of panic, but it recedes and I am left waiting. Just waiting for God. And then, when my heart is still, God is there beside me, silently placing the next stone in front of me and inviting me to take another step.

Soon I come to expect God and his arrival. I know that I can rely on him. I stand here on my stone, my little rocky island, and I turn toward the riverbank to greet God as he comes. He is a little late today, still there on the riverbank searching out the right stone. And only now I see how he is doing it. He is taking the stones away, one by one, from my cottage on the riverbank.

Already it is half demolished. He is dismantling my kingdom, bit by bit, to provide me with the way to his.”

This poem speaks to what the angel says to the two Marys: “Do not be afraid” Do not be afraid, for Jesus is not here. Do not be afraid...your savior has risen! Do not be afraid, for God is right here with you. Do not be afraid, for I am sitting on the stone!

That was the angel's word. It is also Jesus' word to us on this Easter day, for he knows that we need to hear it again and again. Like the poem, we are each on stepping stones of our own. There is no certainty about what is going to come next. But that's what the Easter promise is about. The angel proclaims to us, “Do not be afraid!”

God will come and place that next stone in front of you, and we need not fear.

And do you know what is interesting about our Gospel story this morning? Jesus doesn't come walking out of the tomb when the angel rolls back the stone. Jesus was already gone. Resurrection had already happened. The angel didn't roll away the stone to set Jesus free—Jesus was already gone, headed for Galilee. The angel rolled away the stone so the women could see what had already happened.

When they saw and heard, the women ran off shaking with fear, but also laughing, singing, shouting, embracing—whatever you do when you are filled with great joy!

And so what else does the angel sitting on the stone want us to know? Don't stay here at the place of death! The angel wants us to see that the stone of death has been rolled away, turned over, transformed into a resurrection pulpit! Jesus is not memory, but presence, presence that continues to transform the forces of death all around us. Sometimes when we dare to let God put that next stone in front of us, we will begin to see.

Indeed, there used to be a stone in front of that tomb. And it was moved. There are also stones in your path. Stones that trip and stones that trap. But remember—the God who spoke then, speaks now. The God who forgave, still forgives.

The God who came still comes. He comes into our world. He comes into your world. He comes to do what you can't. He comes to move the stones that you cannot budge. He comes to place the next stepping stone in your life. And you can trust those stones.

Maybe even someday you can sit on top of some of those stones like the angel did. Amen.