



A Stone-Rolling Faith

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Mark 16:1-3

And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salo' me, bought spices so that they might go and anoint [the body of Jesus]. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"

They buried Jesus in a hurry. Some might say it was a botched-up job. The fact is, they just didn't have enough time to do it right.

Let me give you some background:

1. Jesus died on the cross at about noon on a Friday.
2. It was a violation of Jewish law to leave a dead body hanging overnight, especially over the Sabbath.
3. The Jewish Sabbath started at sundown Friday (and continued through sundown on Saturday).
4. That meant they had about six or seven hours to get Jesus down off the cross and buried.
5. The scripture says "when evening came" (Mark 15:42) nobody had spoken up, nobody had asked for his body, nobody had taken his body down from the cross. None of his disciples had come forward, nobody from his family spoke up, nobody seemed to want to be associated with the dead Messiah.
6. Well, nobody else would do it, so a man named Joseph of Arimathea stepped forward. He got up enough courage to go ask Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body down and bury it.

7. Pilate had to wait for official confirmation that Jesus was really dead. When the soldiers finally confirmed the death, Pilate released the body to Joseph of Arimathea. (Mark 15:45) By this time, it was well after sundown. The Sabbath had already begun. They were in violation of Jewish law and custom.

8. Joseph was in a rush. He hurried out and bought a linen shroud (15:46), went to Calvary, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped the body in the shroud, transported it to his tomb, put the body inside, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. There was no time for a proper burial, no time to anoint the body with oils, no time to prepare for a service. There was just no time.

9. You need to know that women were the ones who would have anointed the dead body and prepared it for burial. But, women were not allowed in the graveyard after dark. Women were not allowed into the graveyard on the Sabbath. Since the Gospel of Mark says that the burial happened after dark Friday night, the first time any women would be allowed to go any where near the body would have been sunrise, the morning after the Sabbath - which would be Sunday morning.

That's why you could say the burial was a botched-up job.

That gets us to today's scripture where Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary (not Mary, the mother of Jesus, but Mary, the mother of James), and Salome (not the Salome who danced with seven veils, but another Salome) were on their way to the graveyard.

They were on their way to the graveyard to do what they couldn't do Friday night or all day Saturday. They were carrying spices with them so they could properly anoint the body of Jesus for burial.

While they were on their way, they realized they had a problem. Joseph of Arimathea had sealed off the tomb. He had rolled a great big stone over the entrance. The women knew they weren't strong enough to budge that boulder.

That was their problem. Who would roll that stone away?

Would the soldiers at the graveyard be nice enough to roll that stone away?

Would any of the disciples be there to do it for them?

Would they have to go out and ask strangers to shove that rock aside?

They had a great, big, heavy problem. There was a massive stone standing between them and Jesus. What a predicament, who would roll that stone away?

That's a predicament I know something about, because it seems to me that there's a great big rock pile standing between me and my Jesus. Those rocks are in the way.

It happens more than I like to admit. I go out in search of Jesus. I feel guilty, and I need his forgiveness. I feel lonely, and I want his friendship. I'm filled with grief and sorrow, and I crave his comfort. I'm lost, and I require his direction. There are so many times when I go out in search of Jesus. I come to the place where I knew he'll be, and there's a great, big pile of stones heaped up outside the door - there are all those stones standing between me and my Jesus.

And just like Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome - I need some help rolling those stones away! I need a faith that's strong enough to roll those stones away, because if they're not moved aside, I'll never really know that Jesus lives.

And if I never know that, my life will be empty. I'll sink under the weight of my guilt and my sins. I'll have no hope for tomorrow.

What I need most this Easter morning - and every morning of my life - is a stone-rolling faith! I need a faith that's strong enough, and powerful enough, and mighty enough to roll those stones away. I need a faith that can open wide the door, and let the brilliant light of my risen savior's love shine on me.

How about you?

Have the years piled up some stones around your life?

Stones of bitterness and resentment,

Stones of anxiety and apathy,

Stones of grief and loneliness,

Stones of fear and frustration.

Are there so many stones piled up out there that when you go looking, you just can't see your Jesus again, or believe again, or hope any more?

What about you? Can't you use a stone-rolling faith?

If that's something you'd like to have, you can have it. All you've got to do is take three little steps.

You can have a stone-rolling faith when you remember to worship God. You do that when you come to church. That's the first step.

You'll never be able to see Jesus clearly until you learn something about him, and the best way to learn about Jesus is to be with people who believe in him and know him. The best place to find people like that is in church.

O, I know a lot of people say they don't need church to worship God, that they find God in nature and beauty and kindness. Well, I agree, God can be found in all of those places. The problem with that kind of thinking is that Christianity - and that means a belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God - Christianity is not a solitary profession.

You can't do it alone. Christianity is a fellowship of believers.

You need the church. It's where you build-up your faith muscles. Nobody comes to church with a strong faith built-in. You come to church to learn about it. This is where your faith grows stronger. You meet Jesus in the lives and the witness of the people around you. You meet Jesus in the fellowship. You meet Jesus in a shared meal. You meet Jesus as you study and learn God's word. It's a joint effort.

If you want a faith that's strong enough to roll away the stones that weigh you down, the stones that keep you captive, the stones that separate you from what is good and true - you'll need the help of your sisters and brothers in the faith to develop the strength you need.

If you haven't worked on those faith muscles, life will crush you. When you stand at the edge and look down into the open grave of the person you love the most -

- and you're hurting and raw, wondering how you're ever going to live without that person, wondering if you'll ever love again, or laugh again, or feel whole again -

- if you think you can roll all that grief away all by yourself, if you think you can handle it alone: without God, without the support and understanding of some faith-filled friends -

- you're greatly mistaken.

The only way you can roll away those stones of sorrow and emptiness is when you've got a faith that has been nurtured through the years, a faith founded on friendship, a faith anchored in the support and sustenance of a loving church family.

So, if you want a stone-rolling faith, you'll come to church. That's where it starts. That's the first step.

The second step is to find direction for your life.

Life is a perilous journey. I know there are always times -

- when you don't know where you're headed,
- when you're confused and mixed-up,
- when you're lost and can't find your way back home,

- when you're struggling to make sense out of things you don't understand.

Those stones of confusion keep piling up. They keep rolling across your path. They keep blocking your progress. They keep you from feeling whole and complete.

And what you need most is the strength to roll away all those road blocks so you can get back on the right path, and head in the right direction.

That's what a faith in Jesus Christ can do for you.

Jesus can help you find your way.

He can give you direction.

He can put faithfulness back into your relationships.

He can put tenderness and understanding back in your life.

He can put self discipline and sobriety back into your habits.

He can bring integrity and honesty back into your dealings.

He can put you on the road to being a better person.

It's a faith in Jesus that can do all of that and so much more.

Remember, it was Jesus who said, "Follow me." If you're willing to follow Jesus, he will show you how to roll away all those stones that have blocked your path and left you feeling empty and alone.

If you want a stone-rolling faith, you begin with regularly worshipping God. Then, you learn to lean on Jesus, following his directions to a better life. And third, you need to really give your life to him.

Maybe there are some stones of regret blocking your path, some stones of guilt that bar the way, some stones of unworthiness that cloud your thoughts, some stones of fear that hold you back.

Maybe you're afraid that you'll stumble once you start, that you won't be able to keep your word once you give it, that you'll have to make too many changes.

Well, isn't it time to roll all those stones away?

I know there may be at least one person here this morning who is ready and wants to take that step; one person who wants to pray a prayer giving his or her life to Jesus Christ.

If you happen to be ready to roll those stones away right now, and take a step closer to Jesus, there are three little things you need to do.

First, you've got to say, "I'm sorry" and turn away from the things you know are wrong.

Second, you' ve got to say "thank you" to Jesus for dying on the cross for you.

And third, you' ve got to say "please" - ask Jesus to come into your life. When you ask him, the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself will come live in you.

I want to give any one who is ready the opportunity to pray a prayer like that right now.

You may not be ready. You may not want to do it. You may not think you need to. That' s O.K. You don' t even need to pray right now. All I ask is that you be so very kind, to close your eyes, to bow your heard - you don' t have to pray at all, just be kind and give someone else the opportunity.

You may know someone who needs to pray that prayer. Perhaps you might want to pray for God' s Spirit to touch that person' s heart right now.

I assure you, Jesus himself is here, right now. Just picture him sitting beside you.

If you' d like to pray that prayer, here' s a prayer you can pray - not out loud, but in the silence of your heart.

Lord Jesus Christ, I' m sorry for the things I' ve done wrong in my life. Maybe you' d like to ask his forgiveness for any thing in particular that' s weighing on your conscience. Please forgive me.

I now turn from everything I know is wrong.

Thank you for dying on the cross for me. Thank you for dying so I can be forgiven and set free.

Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. I now receive that gift.

Please come into my life, through the Holy Spirit, and live with me forever. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.