

## **Eyewitness to the Gospel**

Our first Scripture reading, from Acts 10, recounts an event where Peter traveled to Caesarea Maritima, to deliver the Gospel to Cornelius – a Gentile. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, and had gathered his friends and family to listen to Peter speak. Peter tells Cornelius and the listeners that day about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He even tells the crowd, “He [talking about Jesus] was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him” – now here’s the kicker – “after He rose from the dead,” (Acts 10:41). That’s important to note. There were people in those days – even some folks running around these days – who would have people believe that Jesus was a spirit, or ghost or something like that.

Jesus really lived. He really died on the cross on Good Friday nearly 2,000 years ago. He stopped breathing. His heart stopped beating. He was dead. Most of us have experienced death. Death of a grandparent, a parent, a spouse, a friend, a pet. Perhaps even a child. When our loved ones die – we know this – their physical bodies decay. It’s the natural order of things.

It’s always been that way. So often, we get caught up in the familiarity of Easter that we miss the miracle of it. We dress in our fancy clothes, everyone’s happy. There’s no sign of sadness, worry, grief, or fear for us. But it was very different on that first Easter morning long ago, as Mark tells us. The women – Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome – didn’t greet each other with great joy. There were no hallelujahs, no joy in their hushed whispers.

## **The Brave Women Carried the Gospel**

They were mourning the loss of their beloved Teacher and Friend. They had seen Him stripped – not only of His clothes – but every shred of human dignity. He was killed in the most horrible way imaginable, and then laid in a borrowed tomb. Sunset and Sabbath approached quickly and the shops were all closed. They couldn’t even buy the spices to anoint and honor His body.

Their biggest worry this morning was the large stone that had been placed to cover the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. Who was going to move it for them so they could perform this final act of love and honor for their Lord? They were soon going to be in for the biggest shock of their lives! They had seen Jesus die. The women were the ones who hung out at the foot of the cross while Jesus was dying, another gospel tells us.

They gathered quietly. They knew that all the followers of Jesus were currently in danger, and in hiding. But their love and devotion to Christ demanded that they risk their lives. These women were courageous. We often miss this on Easter. The bravest followers of Jesus Christ aren't John and Peter – they're the women – considered at best to be second class citizens in those days. Truly, it was the women who heard the Gospel message, and carried it to Peter and the apostles.

### **You Are Looking For Jesus**

So, on their walk to the tomb early in the morning darkness, I suppose they probably were brainstorming. “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mark 16:3). When the women arrived at the tomb, they were surprised. The heavy stone had already been rolled away – and a young man in a dazzling white robe was sitting there, waiting for this moment.

Who was this man? Where did he come from? Their questions evaporated in their amazement at what he told them. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. Go tell His disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you,’” (verses 6-7).

Today's Scripture ends with the three women in complete shock – fear, actually. They were amazed and terrified, and had resolved among themselves to not say anything about it to anyone. Mark's gospel, the first of the gospel account written, is the only one that contains no resurrection appearance by Jesus. Many scholars think that his gospel ends at verse 8, and that the shorter ending and the longer ending we find in our modern-day Bibles were added soon after the original manuscripts of the gospel began to be circulated by Christians who already knew about the resurrection and felt the story needed to include a grand finale. Perhaps Mark, when he originally wrote his gospel wrote it, and left it unfinished, because, much like his original writing, our lives are unfinished.

### **He Is Risen! He Is Not Here!**

Obviously, the women finally told someone – they had to, or we wouldn't be here to celebrate and worship the Risen Savior this morning. They couldn't keep quiet for long – their whole lives were changed in an instant with the words, “He has risen! He is not here.” How has your life been changed by the Good News – that Christ is risen – that His dead body is not behind a heavy stone in a borrowed tomb? Or, is the heavy stone still in place for you, separating you from the Risen Lord? Are you still afraid – like the three women were – to proclaim the Good News that Jesus is risen?

What would that heavy stone look like if it were still firmly in place, keeping you from seeing Jesus, really knowing “He is not here,” and living the rest of your life with that buried deep in your heart? Maybe your stone is physical – an illness that's

changed your life, or redefined you in ways you never imagined. Maybe it's a relationship that manages to tear you down more than build you up. Or a job that's killing you. Or a lifestyle that keeps you from achieving what you really need and want.

Maybe your stone is social: a contempt for leaders who seem like school children focused on playground taunts, a community defined more by what we don't like than what holds us together. Maybe your stone is emotional: a grief you just can't transform into hope, a sadness that consumes you, a numbness that shrouds you in a darkness not of this world. Maybe your stone is spiritual: questions that nag at your ability to pray, the emptiness of the rituals of worship, the nonsense of praise when your world is careening wildly off course. Or maybe, your stone is unbelief. People may not like to admit to that on Easter Sunday, but there are lots of very smart people on the backside of that stone.

### **Focused on Jesus or on Heavy Stones?**

Here's proof – there's eyewitness evidence, contained in other parts of Holy Scripture. Our passage from Acts this morning, where Peter tells what he saw, is an example of that. Paul speaks of more than five hundred who were also eyewitnesses. He writes to the church at Corinth:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (I Cor. 15:3-6).

Those eyewitnesses – that great cloud of saints – beg: "Believe, Beloved, and receive God's free gift of eternal life." Let Jesus roll the stone away. Somehow, the word that Jesus had risen got past the women's stone of fear. Jesus rolled away the stone. Their silence wasn't the final word. God's hope was the final word.

We believe we've come looking for Jesus on this Easter morning. But many of us are fixated on the stones which get in the way. Sometimes the stones are an inadequate image of Christ Himself. There are times when our fears or limitations keep us from the search for the living Christ. The message of Easter is that none of these stones – no distractions, or inadequacies – are final barriers to a resurrection encounter. We can trust Jesus to roll the stone away, and when it is – He's there to greet us.

So what stone seems insurmountable to you this morning, separating you from a life-changing relationship with the Risen One? I can't claim to know how that stone will be rolled away, what effort it will require, or what it is with which you're struggling. It

may require a life-long exertion on your part, chipping away at it, until the Light of Christ shines through. It may happen today, tomorrow, or maybe when you're drawing your last breath. But I know that at some point, Jesus is going to roll the stone away. And because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Christ is Risen! Thanks be to God.

**Prayer:** Merciful God, we come to You with so many things which weigh us down. We would like an "easy" faith, one that doesn't cause us to look within ourselves, to identify those many ways in which we have forsaken You. But faith is never easy. It requires our very souls. Forgive us, Lord, for all the things which we have neglected to do that would have helped someone else draw closer to You. Heal our hearts from wounds which have been inflicted upon us by anger and misunderstandings which occur in relationships. Prepare our lives to be of service to You. We long for Your presence, Your healing touch, and resurrection lives, given to us through Jesus Christ. Amen.