
The Rolling Stones

Mark 16:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 24, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Earthquake. The very word conjures up our deepest, primal fears. We build strong towers, secure walls, formidable foundations – but something up near the top of the Richter scale turns them all into dust and fragments. Whether it's Haiti, or China, or Chile, or Japan, or one day San Francisco again, we have these images of huge tears in major highways and buildings rumbled to their core. And, more than anything, the sense of being buried alive, scarcely able to move, with a massive mountain of concrete lying across your chest, asking yourself, "Who will roll away this stone?"

Put yourself back on Good Friday night, 33 AD. Jesus' body is safely tucked away in Joseph of Arimathaea's tomb. And covering the tomb is one enormous stone. Focus on that stone for a moment. It's huge. It's solid. It's very, very heavy. It's utterly immovable. It's inanimate nature at its most unforgiving. It's probably existed about as long as the earth itself. It's not the kind of thing that dies. It's just always been there, from the beginning of time, through mollusc, bacteria, invertebrates, dinosaurs, mammoths, Neanderthals – it's seen them all. You can't negotiate with it. It's covering the tomb. It's the final statement on Jesus' death. And it's not going anywhere.

I want you to imagine that stone, and the power of what it represents, through the eyes of the different participants in the Easter story. Think first of the three women who run to the tomb early on this Sunday morning – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – asking one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us?" For these three women the stone represents the depths of grief. They'd loved, and they'd lost. They'd dared to hope, and the object of that hope had been captured, cruelly beaten, unjustly tried, mercilessly ridiculed, and ruthlessly executed. The stone was the barrier between them and their past, a past in which they'd believed in Jesus, believed in God, believed in themselves, believed in the power of love, believed in gentleness, and generosity, and forgiveness, and healing, and grace, and gladness, and truthfulness, and joy.

Yes – they'd believed in joy. They really had. Just for a moment there they'd found a life that they'd never known, a hope that they'd never imagined, a love that could never die. But it had died. Life, hope, love – they'd all died. They were all there, now, squashed and squelched behind that stone. Getting up early to anoint Jesus' body with spices was a way of preserving this wondrous memory, of keeping alive something they couldn't accept was really dead, of honoring a legacy that they could never, for one second, forget. It was an act of gratitude and beauty and dignity in the face of gruesome, calamitous, and final defeat. And the incontrovertible evidence of that defeat was that massive, immovable stone.

Now for a moment change perspective and think about the Roman and Judean authorities, and how they thought about the stone. For the people running Jerusalem in 33 AD, that huge, heavy, immovable stone represented their power, their authority, their being in control. They knew their rule was based on a lie. The Judean leaders like Caiaphas the High Priest were Roman appointees. They lived with daily humiliation and its crushing compromises. The Romans themselves proclaimed the peace of the *Pax Romana* – a peace that was, in truth, no more than a slogan masking the dominance of one army over another. But such lies seemed a small price to pay for the social, economic, and political privileges of being the ruling elite. Jesus had been a serious threat to these cosy arrangements. By healing on the Sabbath, forgiving sins, cleansing the Temple, and being called king, he clustered together all the authorities' worst fears. Having Jesus safely dead, and silencing the voices seeking religious renewal and social revolution – this was what the stone represented to the Jerusalem authorities. Their power was lodged uneasily in the present, not likely to last long; but this execution meant it was safe for another day. The great immovable stone was a bold statement that anyone who came in their way would be squashed like a fly.

But what of Jesus, the figure at the center of the story? What did the stone mean to him? On Palm Sunday Jesus is where God and humanity meet in perfect harmony. Jesus on a donkey epitomizes the renewal of God's people and the coming of the Lord. But five days later everything unravels. The people turn their back on their leader. And, on the cross on Good Friday, the Son discovers he's forsaken by his Father too. He dies utterly alone, disowned by humanity and deserted by divinity. That's what the stone represents to Jesus: his separation from humanity and his separation from the Father. The antithesis of everything he is and came to bring about. Jesus is utterly with the Father and the Spirit in the unity of the Trinity, and he came to restore humanity to companionship with God by being utterly with humanity too. The stone is the sign of contradiction, the symbol of everything that separates the Father from the Son and the Son from humanity and all creation. But here's the crucial point. The stone is part of God's good creation. The bondedness of Christ and the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, is the most fundamental truth there is. The coming of Christ among us shows God's determination to make us companions in the life of the Trinity is as true and permanent as the life of the Trinity itself. Nothing, nothing whatsoever, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation – and certainly not a large, cumbersome, solid stone – can separate Christ from the Father, or us from Christ. So, mighty stone, you may have been here since time began, but I guess it's time for you to roll on by. There's a force greater than gravity at work right now.

For the two Marys and Salome the stone represented the past – the glorious but failed memory of a dream that died. For the Jerusalem authorities, the stone represented the present – the compromised but merciless control they exerted while it lasted. But for Jesus, the stone represented the future. It was the symbol that nothing can separate the Father from him or him from us. Every permanent, immovable, unshakeable obstacle you could possibly think of, between us and God, between death and life, between this life and the life to come – every single one of them is going to find itself going the same way as that stone: rolling, rolling, rolling.

And what about your stone? What does the stone represent for you? Reflect for a moment on what is standing, heavy, unshakeable, immovable, between you and life, between you and love, between you and healing, between you and God. Think again about that image of the earthquake: you lying, scarcely able to move, with a huge slab of concrete lying across your chest, asking yourself, "Who will roll away this stone?" Is that where you are right now? Is that where you've been for a long time? Are you paralyzed, with a great weight across your body, buried under cynicism or sloth or suffering or sadness?

We're all like the three women – we all ache for a glimpse of glory, a taste of joy, a hint of a dream, a vision of hope. But we're all, a little more than we care to admit, like the Jerusalem authorities, full of the compromises that promise to secure control, full of the broken promises made fragile by our anxiety and reluctance to live with uncertainty, full of lies and secrets and half-truths and shabby pretences. The stone seems unshiftable, but we know it's there partly because we haven't got the courage or the faith or the imagination to see that it could really be any different.

Don't forget that when Jesus' friend Lazarus has been four days in the tomb, and Jesus tells Mary and Martha to take away the stone, Martha's having none of it. Jesus' answer is uncomplicated. "Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?" He's asking us the same question today. Easter's going to unravel your habitual grief, Easter's going to dismantle your grubby compromises, Easter's going to unsettle your lingering sadness about the past and your half-baked ways of negotiating the present. Because Easter's asking you the same, simple question: "Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?"

Just for a moment, imagine. Just for a moment, hear the whisper of wonder. Just for a moment, lift your hearts and open your eyes. It's Easter morning. What might it be like if that stone rolled away?

Easter's about something more powerful than an earthquake. An earthquake is when deep in the bowels of earth something shifts, and the effects are felt on the earth's surface. Easter's about a heavenquake. A

heavenquake is when deep in the heart of heaven something shifts, and earth is never the same again. Here comes the heavenquake. Keep your eyes on that massive stone. It's starting to move. It's rolling. Watch it roll.

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your past. Yes, there's sadness back there, yes, there's shattered dreams and broken hearts, yes, there's missed opportunities and failed hopes, yes there's bitterness and resentment, old wounds and promises broken, yes there's hurts you can't forget and blessings you can't remember. But the stone's rolling from the tomb of your past. It's rolling. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your present. Yes, there's compromises there, yes, there's ways you've sold out that would have horrified your youthful idealistic self, yes, there's ways you've domesticated Jesus and kept the church at arm's length and turned dreams into busyness and programmed your life so much there wasn't space to imagine, yes, you read the beatitudes and don't recognize yourself in any of them, yes, you count the fruits of the Spirit and realize you haven't felt joy or peace or gentleness or kindness for years, yes, your heart is dominated by fears about money and the fragility of love and the anxiety of your own mortality and the sense of your own worthlessness – but the stone's rolling from the tomb of your present. It's rolling. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your future. Yes, I know, you've had this massive slab of concrete across your chest, weighing you down, as long as you can remember. It's hard to imagine the future without it. But the stone's rolling. It's rolling away your past. It's rolling away your present. Now it's coming for your future. Yes, you've always felt others were closer to God than you, yes, you've always feared that the hope of God was a fantasy, yes, you've always found prayer difficult, yes, you think the church is full of hypocrites even worse than yourself, yes, you feel paralyzed in the face of your own death, and the expectations of your culture and family, and the limitations of your own energies and resources, yes, you're terrified to entrust your body and soul to the everlasting arms of the crucified savior – but the train's left the station, the ship's sailed, the stone has rolled. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

The stone has rolled. Let it roll. Feel the joy of all your grief and folly and fragility and failure rolling with it. Let it roll. Feel your heart burst with the wonder of resurrection. Let it roll, let it roll, let it roll. This is a heavenquake. Jesus is risen. The stone of death and grief, the stone of sin and control, the stone of fear and paralysis – they couldn't hold steady. They've rolled, sunshine. And your past and your present have rolled with them. But your future's still open. The stone has rolled away and the future is exposed to the fresh air of early morning and new life. Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?

It's Easter. It's a heavenquake. It's the day of the rolling stones.