

Easter Steps

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Mark 16:1-4 — 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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

No matter how familiar you are with the Bible, there’s always something new to be found, always fresh insights to be gleaned from these extraordinary stories and time-honored teachings. Although I feel like I’ve read this morning’s story a hundred times, in preparing for today’s sermon, I noticed something that I’d never noticed before. These three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary, the apostle James’ mother, and Salome—have bought burial spices and are preparing to anoint Jesus’s dead body. Back then, you didn’t have professional funeral homes; you just had the loved ones of the deceased. As three of Jesus’s loved ones, these women are taking this end-of-life ritual into their own hands. And on the way to the tomb, they are saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” I had never really noticed their question before, and never really thought about the fact that they are asking it *on their way* to Jesus’s tomb.

Doesn’t that seem a little weird to you? I mean, they couldn’t think that far ahead? They had enough foresight to go out and buy the burial spices, but not enough foresight to realize that they can’t get the burial spices to the body, without somehow removing this massive stone that weighs well over a ton. Weird though it may seem, we need to remember that these women are grieving—not just the loss of their beloved friend and teacher, but also the trauma of witnessing his brutal execution. Many of us know, from personal experience, that acute grief and trauma can be disorienting, can interrupt and disable our regular functioning.

And even apart from grief or trauma, we all know what it’s like to have things fall through the cracks. When I was living in the country of Jordan, I visited friends in Palestine on several occasions. And when I was preparing for these trips, there were always a lot of things to get in order: housing accommodations, money, time off from work—oh, and then there’s this Israeli border that you’ve got to cross, which could take anywhere from two to twelve hours—and if you’ve got some bribe money for the guards, you’re likely to get out of there closer to two. But anyways, I’m going to visit friends in Palestine, and I arrange for a taxi to pick me up at the boarding school where I’m living. I get in the taxi and start heading for the border—only to realize, several minutes into the taxi ride, that I don’t have my passport with me, and I have to ask the driver to turn around and go back to get it. Now, I kid you not, of the three trips that I took that year from Jordan to Palestine, I made this same mistake *twice*. So, *I* at least have a lot

of sympathy for the three women in our story who forget, until they are approaching Jesus's grave, that a massive stone needs to be moved.

But what's most fascinating to me about our story isn't that they forget; it's that they remember, and then keep going anyways. They say to each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ...and, I dunno, I suppose they all shrug and say, "Guess we'll find out." It'd be like me riding in that taxi, realizing that I don't have my passport, and saying, "Eh, guess I'll just see if security will let me through anyways." I'd have a better chance of walking up to the stone at Jesus's tomb, lowering my shoulder, and busting through.

The women could have turned back. They could have tried to round up Jesus's twelve apostles. They could have gone to the Roman authorities and tried to get permission to dignify the body of the deceased. But they don't. For some reason, they just keep going. Perhaps they knew that Jesus's apostles were unlikely to help: when Jesus was arrested, they all fled the scene, and for the most part they haven't come out of hiding since. It's these three women, not the twelve apostles, who are still courageously following Jesus, even after his execution. Perhaps they knew that the Roman authorities had no interest in dignifying the body of someone who had been deemed a threat to the Empire's national security. The whole point of his crucifixion, from their perspective, was to horrify an occupied people into submission. So, perhaps the women feel like they have no other choice. I mean, they could turn back, just give up, put away the burial spices until the next loved one dies; or they could keep going and trust that the steps they take in faith, wherever they lead, will not be in vain.

If ever there was an example of faith for us to follow, this is it, I think. It's not a passive, naive, overly confident faith: the women don't say, "Oh, I'm sure some angel will come around, roll away the stone for us, and everything will be oookay." But neither is it an anxious or controlling faith: the women aren't desperately contriving or forcing a solution when there is none to be found. Rather, their faith is honest, and honestly questioning, and at peace with the questions. They don't know who will roll away the stone for them, or if it will be rolled away at all, or what they will find when they arrive at the tomb. And yet, they keep walking, keep following, keep moving forward, in faith.

Friends, God doesn't ask us to roll away every stone in our lives with our own two hands. Nor does God ask us to predict how exactly any given stone will get rolled away. God simply asks us to keep moving forward, to carry with us what we think we will need for our journey, and to trust that God will show up and show us how we are to follow. Now, not every stone gets rolled away—at least not in this life. Not every obstacle gets removed. Not every heartache gets healed. But even so, God does show up, and with the eyes of faith, we can see how God is accompanying and guiding us on our journey into abundant life.

When these three women arrive at the tomb, they see that their faith was leading them towards a miracle: somehow, the stone has already been moved, and as they step into the tomb, they find a young man—an angel, it seems—who tells them "Do not be afraid; 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. But go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” But before these three women could even get to the other disciples, before they could start making the couple days’ journey to Galilee, where they’re told they will see Jesus, the Gospel of Mark ends. The oldest versions of the Gospel have just one more verse after the angel’s words. It reads: “So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” This leaves us, as readers, hanging—and leaves us with a choice to make. Like these three women at the end of the Gospel, we have not yet seen the resurrected Jesus. Like them, we have not yet experienced the victory of Jesus’s resurrection, the ultimate defeat of sin and death. And so, we have a choice to make—or perhaps an invitation to accept: the invitation to keep going, to keep searching, to keep journeying, trusting that we will eventually find Jesus—and find resurrection: find new life where there was death, find joy where there was pain, find hope where there was despair.

We need nourishment for this journey, friends. In a spirit of celebration, then, let us receive the gifts of this table, which remind us that the God who is Love came to Earth in Jesus, suffered as one of us, and offers us the victory of resurrection: abundant life now and forever. Amen.