

"Move...That...Stone!!"

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;

Matthew 28:1-10

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Rev. David E. Young

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One of our favorite shows these days is "Extreme Makeover". It's the show where the team shows up at the home of a deserving family and sees the conditions they've been living in and hears about their hopes and dreams. The family then gets sent off for a vacation while the team assembles a raft of willing workers who tear things apart and then build them up again, usually from the ground up.

Through the course of the show we get glimpses of the work they are doing but nobody sees the finished product until the family is brought back and the neighbors and everyone are gathered. There's a huge bus blocking everyone's view of the finished house and on cue the family and everyone yells: "Move! That! Bus!!!"

The bus rolls away and the camera catches the first reactions of the family and everyone as the transformed home is revealed for the first time. It's usually a pretty emotional and moving moment, especially when we look back on the way things used to be and the way they are now.

Everything is different. Nothing can be the same again.

In some respects, resurrection is like that. Everything is different. Nothing can be the same again. But that's about where the similarities end.

Resurrection is God's work, not ours. We don't see it happen, it just arrives. It comes to all of us, whether we are hard-working, deserving people or ne'er-do-wells who have mooched off of others and traded on their good graces to get by.

Easter begins not by lots of careful, reconstructive work on our part. Easter begins with God's work. There is an earthquake and an angel. No one yells, "Move...that...stone!" because no one expects resurrection. But in spite of whatever we might expect or hope for, God is at work. The stone has already been rolled away.

The guards who had been posted to make sure that nothing like this would happen are struck speechless with fear. The angel speaks to the women telling them not to fear, that Jesus has been raised as he said.

The stone isn't rolled away to let Jesus out. It is rolled away to let us in, to let us see that the tomb is indeed empty and that Jesus is alive forevermore!

It is empty even before the stone is rolled away.

The tomb is empty. This is the one fact that no one disputes. The women see it is empty. So do the guards. But from there the paths diverge. The women become witnesses to the resurrection. The guards become paid-off to be part of a cover-up.

Say what one might about Jesus' teachings and healings and outrageous behavior throughout the time of his earthly ministry, once we get to this part of the story one cannot remain neutral to Jesus Christ. Either he is the Son of God risen from the dead

whose presence here even today marks the Church as a living body of his disciples, or he is a memory and a pipe dream.

Jesus' resurrection is a point of departure, a point of decision. From this moment on, people will line up on one side of this divide or the other.

From this point on the church has a mandate and a charter and a mission to move out in faith and hope and love into every corner of the world and into every aspect of human life to preach a message of forgiveness and renewal of life and endless possibility.

The church has a calling to cry out, "Move ... that ... stone!" whenever people are imprisoned by hurt or pain or hopelessness or despair. We do not need to remain entombed by our life circumstances.

Easter begins when the stone that keeps us more dead than alive is also rolled away to reveal the new life that can be ours because Jesus lives.

Easter happens to each of us in different ways, each and every day.

It isn't so much that death has been defeated or is no longer a part of our experience. No. It's that death will no longer have the last word. It no longer has that threatening power it once had. Those who are in Christ are a new creation altogether. And eternal life will have the last word. God's love will have the last word.

Those who continue to live in the past, in the midst of realities that are all too real for them, will be overcome with fear and unable to accept the reality of the resurrection. That's what happened then and that is what happens today as people try to explain it away.

The resurrection of Jesus cannot be understood apart from faith. How we choose to talk about it will depend on our experience of the risen Christ.

The first disciples had to get beyond the painful reality of Good Friday and the utter abandonment of their hope if they were to be transformed into Christ's body on earth, the Church.

We also face painful realities and question whether hope is a reasonable thing to hang onto in light of the evidence of our own lives. Like those disciples, our lives are filled with all kinds of mixed messages.

Some are confronting cancer and other debilitating diseases. Others are seeing long-term relationships come to an end. Others of us are being forced to look in new directions for meaningful work.

Many are struggling with painful experiences and with the guilt that comes from the inability to extend forgiveness. Others are longing to hear words of forgiveness that never seem to take shape.

But, along with these realities we have the reality of a transformed group of disciples and we have their testimony that what they experienced of the risen Christ had forever changed

their lives and had given them a hope that nothing could ever quench or kill.

They were transformed from fear into faith, from doubt into assurance, from despair into joy. And we can also experience that transformation.

There will never be enough evidence of resurrection to convince the skeptics. There will always be enough evidence of resurrection to sustain the faithful and to transform our lives.

Frederick Buechner said: "It's not Jesus' absence from an empty tomb that moves us. It's his presence in our empty lives."

This Easter day may Christ's presence in your life and in the lives of those around you be enough of a reason for you to have hope and to be filled with joy.

We can pray to God to move ... that ... stone that is keeping us locked into one way of living, one way of viewing our life, because we know that God has already moved ... that ... stone that had Jesus locked into one reality, the reality of a painful death on the cross.

God is in the business of moving stones, of unlocking doors that seem to be hopelessly secured against ever changing.

By God's grace, may whatever stone is in our path be moved so that we can realize that Christ is alive and God's word is true and God is "for" us and not "against" us, and our lives are filled with possibility and promise because of this Easter day.

Thanks be to God!