

“It’s Empty! Chuck the Stone”

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Graphics: stones

Big Truth: The stone that was put in place to hold Jesus in and others out was rolled away when Mary got to the tomb on Resurrection morning. She and the disciples didn’t know what was happening, and were afraid, bewildered, and concerned. Our lives can oftentimes be a string of fear, confusion, and stress, especially during this global pandemic that has changed everything. The one thing this last year has not changed is the fact that the stone is still rolled away and the tomb is still empty. Jesus is still alive and the stone represents fear, confusion, and stress in our lives being rolled away because Jesus is alive.

Focus Phrase: I’m chucking the rock that’s holding my fear, confusion, and anger.

1. Scripture

- A. Take a deep breath, church! So far, in worship this morning, we’ve sung and praised and have a grand sense of the amazing story that Christians are proclaiming today all around the world. It’s a message that we’ve proclaimed for 2,000 years! Jesus is Risen indeed!
- B. But, now, we get to the part of our worship which I think is THE most important. I’m not talking about the sermon, by any means. I’m talking about the **reading of scripture**...the Holy-Spirit-inspired word of God written down for us to read and believe.
- C. And, our scripture this morning is THE pinnacle of the entire Bible. Every page of the Bible, from the first pages of Genesis to the last pages of Revelation point to THIS...the **Resurrection of Jesus**.
- D. So, let’s pray and open our bibles to John chapter 20, starting in verse 1.
- E. **PRAY!**
- F. The resurrection of Jesus...happened...like...this!
- G. **Read John 20:1-18**
- H. “So...How’re you doing?” Seriously...How’re you doing?
 - i. It’s a question we ask each other a lot. Sometimes we want to know the truth. Other times, it’s just something we say because we don’t know what else to say. For the world in 2021, the answer to that question depends on so many factors.
 - ii. The global pandemic that’s rocked our world, our lives, and our communities and churches lingers on after upending an entire year. It’s affected just about everything.
 - iii. Yet, if we think about this past year in relation to the church, the answer to the question of, “How’re you doing this Easter?” I think would be, “We’re doing WAY better than last Easter.”

- iv. Last year, we had an Easter Sunday in-house worship attendance of 0. No one. Not one person came to the church on Easter morning, or Good Friday, or Maundy Thursday, for that matter. No one went on the Walk to the Crosses. We cancelled the Easter Egg Hunt. And that's the way it stayed for several months. We're a bazillion percent higher this year!
 - v. Now, that doesn't mean we didn't worship last year. We certainly did! It doesn't mean that we didn't proclaim "He's Alive!" We did! But for many months, and even now in some ways, the church has been locked behind a stone in a cold dark place.
 - vi. For a long time, our church, our lives, our communities, our world found out that we don't have as much control over our lives as we thought.
- I. The first part of this account of the first Easter - John 20:1-10 - has some pretty clear parallels with the state of our world, locked in a global pandemic.
- i. There've been copious amounts of confusion, misinformation, fear, discouragement, stress, anger, sickness and death. You name it. And we still have it. We've experienced it. In profound ways, like the stone that locked Jesus into the tomb, the stone of fear and anger has been locked in place. Our lives have been quiet, isolated, cut-off, stressful, and so much more.
 - ii. If we were able to ask the disciples and the people who loved and spent time with Jesus on the morning of the Resurrection, "How're you doing?" They would say, "Well...pretty terrible, thanks for asking!"
 - a. On Friday, Jesus was crucified on a cross in a gruesome display of misplaced power by the ruling government and religious authorities that saw Jesus as a threat.
 - b. Satan thought he'd won. But God's plan all along was for Jesus to die an earthly death in order to be a sacrifice for our sin. The Apostle Paul, who would believe in Jesus years after the crucifixion said this, "[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."
 - c. His body was then laid in a tomb and a huge stone was rolled into place. The stone used was not some small rock, though...it was a stone that was rolled into a groove carved into the rock...basically locked into place. To move it would've been almost impossible.
 - d. Saturday was silent...the disciples were in despair. They were filled with discouragement, fear, confusion, stress, and anger...you name it. That's the backstory.

- e. In John's gospel, on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus...or maybe she just wanted to be as close as she could get to the last time she saw Jesus.
- f. When she got to the tomb, the huge stone was rolled away!!
WHAT?!?!? WHAT?!?!?!?!?!?
- g. Now, WE know why it was rolled away. Jesus wasn't there. Jesus had already walked out of his own grave under his own power. As we're reading this, we're thinking, "Yay! The tomb is empty! Jesus is alive!"
- h. But that's NOT what Mary thought. Mary was afraid. She was bewildered. Mary was concerned and distressed and angry. Instead of celebration, Mary assumed that someone had stolen the body of Jesus.
- i. So, to pile-on the emotions of Jesus' horrible, bloody death, now someone's come and violated Jesus' body by somehow rolling away the stone and stealing his dead body! It just kept getting worse and worse. Wave after wave of fear and confusion, not unlike what we've experienced in many ways this year.
- j. Mary never even looked into the tomb...she panicked and ran - urgently - all the way back to where the disciples were staying.
- k. The rest of the first part of the story happened pretty fast, building in intensity as it went.
 - i) Once Mary reported to the disciples that someone stole Jesus' body, Peter and the beloved disciples ran to the tomb to see what she was talking about.
 - ii) They got there, saw the linens neatly wrapped up...saw the head cloth that was wrapped around Jesus' head. Saw the empty tomb.
 - iii) SOMETHING happened here...something amazing!
 - iv) They KNEW then that Mary telling the truth! What they ALSO knew was that Jesus' body wasn't stolen. See, no grave-robber would unwrap a dead body in order to haul it away, even if they COULD get the stone rolled away.
 - v) So, the linens, the empty tomb, the stone rolled away...it all pointed to the fact that Jesus had INDEED been raised from the dead!
 - vi) And in that moment, their fear started to melt away...their confusion was taking a turn...their distress was lessening. All because the stone was rolled away...which meant the tomb was empty and the body wasn't stolen.
- iii. The men who had run to the tomb returned home...story over, right?
- iv. NOT EVEN CLOSE! Now it gets good!

- J. The second part of the text in verses 11-18 tells us that everything changed.
- i. The difference wasn't that the disciples studied the empirical data and came to the conclusion that Jesus was somehow raised from the dead.
 - ii. The difference was that the stone that had been rolled away began to take on a VERY different meaning. It started with Mary, then to the disciples, then to the world.
 - iii. See, Mary stayed at the tomb after the disciples left. She wept. She wasn't sure what happened still. She wasn't even sure she believed what she was thinking or seeing.
 - iv. When she finally mustered the courage to look into the tomb, she didn't just see the grave clothes like Peter and the beloved disciple.
 - v. She saw two ANGELS sitting there! They asked her a simple question, "Why are you weeping?"
 - vi. Her answer was something like, "Well, you know... Jesus was killed... his body was right here... now it's gone and I don't know where they put it."
 - vii. But as she turned, she saw another person (we know it's Jesus - she doesn't) - she thought it was the gardener. She asks him, "Where did they put Jesus' body?"
 - viii. And all Jesus had to say was, "Mary." (pause) "Mary." And in that instant, she recognized his voice - the voice of her Shepherd.
 - ix. "Teacher!!!" she replied.
- K. In that moment, it all changed. The fear was gone. The confusion was gone. The dismay and anger were gone. Jesus was alive!
- L. Mary stood next to Jesus and everything in that moment melted into peace and joy and hope for the future.
- M. Jesus said, "GO! Tell the disciples that I'm back. Tell them I'm getting ready to ascend back to the Father! Tell them what you've seen."
- N. And that's exactly what Mary did. She ran, no doubt, back to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord!"

2. Application

- A. The tomb was empty, church! DO YOU BELIEVE IT??!! Do you? Jesus walked RIGHT out of that grave, after shedding the grave clothes, and moving that stone away in a supernatural display of the power of God!
- B. For the disciples, the stone was a symbol of fear, confusion, and grief, with a little anger mixed in. They hated that stone.

- C. If we're honest, the last year has been marked by varying levels of fear, and confusion, and grief, and a little anger mixed in. It's been the hardest year I can remember in my 50 years...and especially in ministry.
- D. As a pastor, I've seen some amazing ministry take place in innovative ways. On the other hand, our hearts have been broken for those we haven't seen, those who have lost loved ones, and the state of our world, including conflict based solely on racial inequality, and an invisible virus that's changed our world, and the political chaos we've endured.
- E. Yet, church, hear this loud and clear: **The stone is STILL rolled away! Jesus is STILL not there. Jesus is NOT dead in that tomb behind that blasted stone. Jesus is STILL alive today! And he's standing in front of you calling your name!**
- i. No stone can keep us in fear of what might happen to us or this world. Jesus is alive to take away fear. If you're afraid, give any fear you have over to Jesus. (pick up the stone) Name your fears and say, "Jesus, I'm chucking the stone so that my fear is gone."
 - ii. No stone can lock us into confusion or grief. Jesus moved that stone so that we could be set free in Him. Give any confusion or grief over to Jesus. Name them and then say, "Jesus, I'm chucking the stone so that my grief and confusion are released to you."
 - iii. No stone can hold us in a constant state of anger towards any of the things that are happening in this world or in our lives. Give your anger at the virus or politics or injustice or simply that things are not as you hoped over to Jesus. Say, "Jesus, because you rolled that stone away, I'm chucking the stone away to give you my anger."
- F. Because He's Alive, though, we don't just chuck the stone and sit at the empty tomb. Because Jesus is alive and living in you and me, **it's time to go!**
- G. Jesus is alive in people who have chucked the stone and are showing his grace, his love, his forgiveness, his healing and his justice. Jesus is alive and well whenever a stranger is welcomed, a child is loved, a friend is forgiven, a patient is healed and an injustice is made right.
- H. The hymn "Christ Is Alive!" was written by a pastor named Brian Wren for Easter Sunday 1968, just 10 days after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated. Wren wanted to acknowledge this terrible loss while also proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus.
- I. "Christ is alive!" he wrote. "Let Christians sing. The cross stands empty to the sky. Let streets and homes with praises ring. Love, drowned in death, shall never die." Yes, a terrible crime had been committed on the cross. An awful injustice had been done. But now the cross was empty and love would never die.

- J. Truly, the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty! He's not there. Instead, he's in his followers who act with justice, love and praise.
- K. Open your eyes to see that Jesus is alive and well in you, and in the people around you.
- L. Finally, we, as Easter people coming out of a crazy year and ready to chuck some stones, are challenged to look to the future, not to the past.
 - i. Our risen Lord Jesus is not simply with us — he is **ahead** of us, always ahead of us, calling us into the future that he's preparing for us.
 - ii. Our job is to figure out where Jesus is leading us, and to follow him there.
 - iii. It's time to move toward new possibilities for deeper connections with family members and friends, new possibilities for vital ministry and mission in the church, and new possibilities for justice and righteousness in our community and nation.
 - iv. We don't have to focus the stones holding us. Not with THE stone rolled away and OUR Lord calling us forward.

3. Conclusion

- A. So, "How're you doing?" As you walk out of here today, I pray that the hope of the Resurrection is yours completely. Jesus is RISEN, indeed!
- B. But, just in case it's still something that you need to work on, take that stone that you found on your seat with you. If you're at home, go find a stone.
- C. Later today or this week, when you're ready, find a place away from the crowds and where you can get some distance, and **chuck that stone**.
- D. Let a year's worth, a life's worth, maybe, of whatever the Holy Spirit is identifying in you to chuck - fear, anger, sadness, loss, confusion - and chuck it like Jesus did that stone in front of His tomb.
- E. Jesus didn't need that stone to hold anything...he didn't need that tomb any more. Neither do you. Empty out your tomb and live!
- F. Be alive and living for Jesus!
- G. Chuck the stone!
- H. In a few minutes we're going to run to the table that holds the promise that Jesus is calling us forward from here, into the future. When we come to the communion table, we remember and celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection, joyfully and with resolve.
- I. From there, we rise, with our stone in hand to go out into the world to proclaim, "HE IS RISEN!"
- J. Let me invite you to find the communion elements you were given...
- K. Let's pray...communion prayer...