

He Speaks, Stones Roll!

I don't know if you have ever given this much thought, but the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were "cataclysmic." Matthew 27:50-54 say: *"And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'"*

The dictionary defines "cataclysmic" like this: "1. A violent upheaval that causes great destruction or brings about a fundamental change. 2. A violent and sudden change in the earth's crust." All these things were true at the death and resurrection of Jesus. The earth literally "moved," and split open. There was destruction: the extremely heavy Temple curtain covering the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom. Graves were broke open. Logical deduction tells us that homes, as well as religious and government buildings, were also damaged, or perhaps even demolished. Before it was all over, one particular stone--a great, freshly sealed stone--was caused to roll away from the tomb it guarded, revealing the spot where the body of Jesus had once been but was no longer. The Death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought about "fundamental change," fundamental change for a dying thief, a grieving mother and friend, a Roman Centurion whose eyes and heart were suddenly opened, and then for the many who saw Jesus alive after His Resurrection. And, through those who believed, the death and Resurrection of Jesus brought fundamental change to the world. In fact, this fundamental change continues to occur and is available to us today.

Barak Obama, John McCain, and Hilliary Clinton all promise to bring positive change to our nation, but the real change Agent, the only One who can fundamentally change human hearts and society for good is Jesus Christ.

The cataclysmic change brought by Jesus was foreshadowed in the words of the 46th Psalm; Psalm 46:2+3; 6-11 say:

"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. . . Nations are in

uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. . . Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

God is the author of cataclysmic change, change that destroys what must be destroyed and creates what must be created. Easter reminds us to remain still before this all mighty and awesome God and understand that there is nothing He cannot change. The One who spoke the universe into being, the One who created mankind and breathed into him the breath of life, the One who raised Jesus from the dead is able to move whatever stumbling stones may lie on our path. He is able to move the stones that keep us locked in graves of guilt, shame, and fear. He is able to move the stony hearts that keep us from loving and being loved to our full potential. **He is able.**

From our Scripture lesson from Mark 16 this morning, we read in verses 1-4: *"When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?' But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away."*

I invite you to think about the question "who will roll away the stone?" I invite you to make it personal. The women were on their way to the tomb of Jesus to anoint His body, to complete the burial rituals that remained incomplete because of the Sabbath. The women had a worthy goal in mind, but they believed that there was a great stone that would need to be removed before they could proceed with their plan. What stones do you imagine stand in the way of you doing what God has called you to do? What stones do you see standing in the way of becoming the person whom God wants you to become? What stones cause you to stumble? What stones weigh you down? What stones bar your way to your place in the kingdom of God?

Let me tell you about some stones I've seen Him move over the years of my ministry. There was a little girl we knew at the Round Knob Church of God near the beginning of our ministry. She was

suffering and her mother was frantic because this little girl had a severe curvature of her spine. The doctors were recommending a full body cast to treat her deformity. But this single mother didn't know how she could manage to care for her daughter under those conditions. She didn't know how she could pay for the expense of the treatment. She didn't want to see her daughter living with such confinement. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the treatment would really help her in the end.

This mother who was a part of a small bible study and prayer group we had started became convinced that it was the will of God to heal her daughter through our prayers. I'll never forget the night we prayed for her. I didn't have that much faith, but the little girl's mother had heard a word from Jesus, and so we laid hands on the little girl and prayed. When we touched that girl to pray for her the presence of the Holy Spirit came upon us. The whole room seemed charged with electricity, and when it was all said and done, the medical X-rays confirmed it, the abnormal curvature of the little girl's spine was gone. The little girl could also sing like a bird and when she sang "He touched me," it was made all that much more special, because we knew He really had--touched her. **He spoke and the stone rolled.**

There was a man I knew in the village of Six Mile Run. He didn't know Christ but his wife had been praying fervently for his conversion. One day he was coming out of the bar and almost ran into his wife's preacher who was walking down the sidewalk after being in the woods that morning hunting squirrels. There were no words spoken, between the two men at that moment, but the Holy Spirit used that providential encounter to change the man's heart. The preacher didn't even know anything had happened until much later, but the man said that when he came out of the bar and saw the preacher (and I don't know if the gun had any influence or not), the man was convinced that God had spoken to him. He gave his heart to Jesus and never returned to the bar again. **When God speaks stones roll.**

When I was in seminary in Ohio, I ministered in two small United Methodist churches. We had begun a small home Bible Study there modeled after the one we had had at the Round Knob Church of God. One night I was hosting the group at the Parsonage and only one couple showed up. If I remember right the weather was bad and Betty Jane was working, so it was just the three of us. As soon as the two of them showed up it was evident that they were upset. They had had an argument in the car on the way to the meeting, and by the time they arrived there was this big boulder that had grown between

them. I asked them what had happened and they explained to me that the husband had said something that really upset his wife. At that particular time I didn't have very much counseling experience or any training, and I hadn't been married all that long myself. I was also alarmed because I cared for this couple as friends and knew how much they meant to the church. I didn't want anything bad to happen to their marriage. So all the time they were talking to me I was praying to the Lord for His assistance. And then suddenly I saw it! God helped me to see it. The husband said something that he had meant one way and his wife had heard it another way. I was able to help the husband understand how his words had been misconstrued. I was able to help the wife hear what her husband meant by what he said. And, just like that, the stones of mistrust and resentment were rolled away. **When God speaks stones roll.**

This past summer I introduced you to a hitchhiker I had picked up and took home to supper 37 years ago. When we found him, Jim was teetering on the rock hard edge of a nervous breakdown. The difficult realities of his life had become too heavy for this seventeen-year-old young man to bear. But once we showed him the love of Christ and explained God's word to him, once he knew he didn't have to carry the burden by himself, the stones that held him down began to be rolled away. He's still giving God glory these many years later.

I also saw God move stones at Shiremanstown and I have seen God move stones here in Altoona. In almost 39 years of ministry, I've seen many stones rolled away. I've seen rocks of doubt shattered as persons have trusted in Christ as their personal Savior. I've seen boulders of prejudice and years of resentment over-turned when people have been brought into the Family of God. I've seen people set free from the hard stones of various addictions and habitual sins. I've seen family relationships healed, grudges laid aside, fear in the face of death conquered. I've even seen some demons flee. **God still speaks and stones still roll.**

I like the next verse in our Scripture passage too: Mark 16:5 says, "As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed." One thing I've discovered over the years is if we want to see God roll stones, we need to be willing to enter some pretty dark and scary places. One of the ministries we have here at Fourth Street, in which I have seen great stones moved, is our ministry with the Compassionate Friends, the support group for parents whose children have died or been killed. I don't think there are any stones that are heavier or more confining than the massive stone of parental grief at the loss of a child. Personally, I

cannot imagine anything worse than that. But because we have dared to go there and meet with those who grieve, we have been privileged to see the miracle of restored purpose and hope. It is a process that sometimes takes a very long time, but we can always tell when God moves that stone. We can see the light return to tear strained eyes, the restored ability to laugh again, the courage to dream new dreams. **When God speaks stones of sorrow roll.**

Mark 16:6-8 say, "*Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*"

There are two phrases that jump out at me in these verses, and both are found in verse 6: "**don't be alarmed,**" and "**He has risen.**" You may be facing some very hard and heavy stones in your life this morning. You may be facing guilt, shame, or the fear of death for yourself or for someone you love. You may be struggling with difficult relationships or with the grief and anger of a relationship that has recently ended. You may be dealing with a friend's betrayal, the loss of a job, a serious health problem, a financial crunch. You may be struggling with an addiction of your own or with someone else's addiction at home or in your workplace. You may feel trapped, pinned down, closed in, or shut out; you may feel like you can't breathe, that you are buried alive. But mark these phrases in your Bibles and take them to heart: "**Don't be alarmed.**" "**He has risen.**" **Because He's risen stones still roll!**

Now the question in all of this that I want to try to answer for you is this: How can one know that Easter is real? How can one know that Jesus rose from death and is still alive today? How can anyone know that? I offer you three simple steps in answer: #1 bring your stone to the Lord in prayer; ask Him what to do. #2 continue to pray and to search God's word until you've heard the Lord speak. Proverbs 3:5+6 say, "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." #3 obey the word He gives you: Say what He leads you to say, go where He tells you to go, do what He impresses upon you to do. I predict it won't be long until you know He lives. **When He speaks and we obey stones still roll!**

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Psalm 46; Matthew 27:50-54;

Mark 16:1-8

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