

“Who moved the Stone?”

Easter Sunday 4th April 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Acts 10: 34 - 43

Psalm 118: 14 - 24

John 20: 1 - 18

(Children’s Activity: ... 10 pictures to colour, telling the story of Easter.)

What was on the mind of Mary Magdalene as she went to the tomb early on that first day of the week? Doubtless she was still in the early stages of grief ... barely able to grasp the enormity of what had happened on the Friday, when Jesus died on the cross. Her Lord and Master was dead ... and Mary wanted to do the only thing she could for him ... to anoint his body with spices as was the custom for a fitting burial.

Mark tells us that Mary was not alone ... Mary the mother of James and Salome was with her, and their concern was how they would get into the tomb. The stone which sealed the tomb would have been large and circular ... cut so as to roll in a gully and cover the entrance ... but much too heavy for the women to move unaided.

They need not have worried. The stone had already been rolled out of the way, and the tomb was empty ... but this was not a comfort to Mary and the others.

What would you have thought, had it been you?

Certainly Mary's first thought was not about resurrection. During the previous few days, her whole world had come crashing down around her. It must have seemed that everything which could have gone wrong had gone wrong.

Jesus had been arrested like a criminal ... his closest friends had deserted him ... even his right-hand man had denied him. Their whole company was in disarray and living in fear of what might become of them. Mary had seen her Lord die a cruel and terrible death ... and now it seemed that his enemies would not even allow his body to rest in peace.

What more could she possibly bear?

So Mary's assumption seems reasonable enough, and she returned to Peter and John, saying (John 20:2):

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him.”

During Holy Week, the children from the school who came to “Experience Easter” used stones as symbols of their Hopes and Dreams, which they placed at the foot of the cross. But stones can also represent our burdens ... or the things which get in the way of our relationship with God, and which we find very hard to move.

For Mary, the stone was a literal barrier, until she found it had been moved. Then, instead

of giving her hope, it filled her with fear. Her recent experiences caused her to see the empty tomb through the filter of hopelessness ... not as a sign of God's power, but a symbol of despair.

I imagine we all have 'stones' in our lives, of one kind or another ... things which get in the way ... which cause us to doubt, or to hold back from trusting God completely ... or else burdens which we find it hard to let go of. We are so easily shaped by our experiences and blinkered by our prejudices .- and sometimes it is almost comforting to hold on to our fears.

We may struggle with bad memories ... things which have been said or done to us ... or things we have said or done ourselves. Some of us may be weighed down with sorrow, or guilt, or confusion of belief. Others may hold on to wrong thinking because it is easier than facing the challenge of seeing things differently. We get stuck!

What is it that is so big in your life ... so heavy ... that it seems impossible to shift?

Peter had to change his thinking, some little while after the resurrection. He had believed that Jesus was for the Jews and for no-one else ... God's Messiah for God's Chosen People. Like many generations before him, he had forgotten God's call on the people and nation of Israel to be:

“a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6)

But Acts 10 finds Peter in Caesarea, visiting the home of a Roman centurion called Cornelius ... a devout and God-fearing man ... a generous contributor to the needs of the poor, and a man of prayer, respected by the Jewish people ... but still a Gentile.

How come? What had happened to change Peter's attitude?

Only two days before, God had revealed to Peter, through a vision, that the good news about Jesus was not just for the Jews ... that men and women of every language and every ethnic background are equally acceptable to him. It is not where you come from that matters ... or your religious background, or who your parents are - but what you yourself believe, that truly counts ... and ultimately, in whom you choose to put your trust.

Cornelius was himself motivated by an angelic vision in which God told him to ask Peter to come to him from Joppa. He had gathered a large crowd in honour of Peter's visit ... and, inspired by his new understanding, Peter broke with established convention and Jewish Law to enter this Gentile's home and tell him and his friends the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Cornelius and his friends listened as Peter reminded them of what they already knew about Jesus. They had heard about his ministry throughout Judea and the Galilee ... of teaching and healing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

So then Peter told them what they didn't know ... about Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead on the third day, and how he and others were witnesses to the truth ... and how Jesus had been with them, and eaten and drank with them, following his resurrection ... and how he had appointed them to preach to the people this astonishing fact (Acts 10:43):

“... that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

That's quite a statement, don't you think? ... “EVERYONE who believes in him?

But how often do we set the standard higher than God himself does? We tend to embellish the promise with all sorts of conditions ... things people do which in our minds make them unacceptable to God ... or things which people don't do which we think they ought to do.

You know how it is ... you can't be a proper Christian if you play the lottery, if you read your horoscope, get drunk, swear, watch dodgy videos or bet on the horses ...

... and a couple of generations ago you could have added, at least in some Churches: you can't be a proper Christian if you go to the cinema, or go out dancing.

Many people believe that you have to be good to be loved by God ... or that you have to be living a certain kind of life ... or that God is only interested in 'religious' people.

Where does it say all that in the Bible? How does that fit with:

“... that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Is that all it takes to be right with God ... simply to believe in him?

That seems to be what Peter is saying, doesn't it?

Now ... we need to be careful here, because we have all come across people who say things like:

“Oh yes, I'm a Christian ... but you don't need to go to Church to be a Christian.”

... and what they really mean is:

“If I had to fill in my 'religion' on a form, I'd put C of E ...
and I sometimes watch Songs of Praise if there's nothing better on the telly.”

Many people say things like this when actually they've never given Jesus a serious thought, and have no idea about whether they really believe in him and what he did, let alone what it means to be his disciple.

It is clear throughout the Scriptures that 'believing in' Jesus is more than a simple assent to his existence ... it is obvious in the gospels that even the demons believe to that extent, and tremble! That is where it begins ... the foundation of faith ... but it is only a beginning.

Faith leads on to a relationship of love and trust and joyful obedience. True belief is evidenced by change, as we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, and allow God to change us and to help us become more like Jesus.

So we are right to expect to see change in the life of a believer. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ we cannot go on as we did before ... and it is time to let go of the lottery, and

reading your horoscope, getting drunk, swearing, watch dodgy videos or betting on the horses ... though I'm not so sure about going to the cinema or dancing!

Everyone who accepts Jesus as Lord and Saviour will be changed by the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, as he does his work of transforming us more into the likeness of Jesus.

But how often have people been put off even making a first step towards Jesus because the Church has made them feel they are not good enough? Plenty of people are all too aware that they are not good enough for God. The last thing they need is Christian people telling them they are right!

This the whole point, after all, isn't it? None of us are good enough for God ... "We are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under thy table", as the old Prayer Book puts it ... but God is merciful and gracious, and invites us to come to him and be forgiven.

God proved the point dramatically for Peter. While he was still speaking to Cornelius and his friends, the Holy Spirit came upon them, taking them all by surprise ... and they spoke in tongues and joyfully praised God together ... so much so that Peter ordered them all to be baptised. It was clear that these Gentiles were true believers, and acceptable to God.

Peter's whole viewpoint was changed through this experience ... by the intervention of the Holy Spirit of God, the stone was rolled away!

Is it possible that we allow a 'stone' of some sort to dominate our thinking ... some misunderstanding that gets in the way of a deeper relationship with God, or which keeps us from the freedom of believing? In the same way as God changed Peter's mind, if we have hardened attitudes and wrong understandings, God can change us, and reveal his truth to us. We need only to invite him in ... to be at work in our lives.

But let's return to that Resurrection morning.

Mary and the other women, coming to the tomb, were disturbed at first by the moving of the stone. It shattered their expectations ... their view of 'how things are'.

Their first thought was that it was the religious authorities which had come and taken Jesus' body ... and many have used that argument down the years as a way of explaining away the resurrection. As an argument, it doesn't hold water, of course. If they had wanted to prove that the resurrection had not happened, all they needed to do was produce the body.

There have been a few other crackpot theories over the years.

Some have claimed that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, suggesting that this ordinary man, having suffered a Roman flogging with nails-studded whips, forced to carry his cross out of the city, and crucified by expert executioners ... had merely fainted on the cross, come to in the tomb, manhandled a vast stone out of the way, overcome a trained Roman guard, and appeared to his disciples in remarkably good shape.

Others have claimed that the disciples, who were fearful for their own lives, came and overwhelmed the soldiers, stole the body and claimed Jesus had risen from the dead ... which makes little sense when you remember that many of them subsequently laid down

their own lives for the cause of the Kingdom. Hardly likely if they knew it was all a scam.

There is only one reasonable answer to the question: "Who moved the stone?"

God did it. The mighty power of God raised Jesus Christ to life and burst open the tomb, just as Jesus said would happen. Mary Magdalene was the first to meet him, as she wept outside the tomb ... not recognising him at first, because his resurrection body was changed, as ours will be changed when we too are raised. But she knew him ... and Mary ran to the disciples with the most important news the world has ever heard:

"I have seen the Lord!"

The disciples, who were at first confused and fearful, very soon encountered their Risen Lord ... and they believed. Out of their belief the Church sprang into being, commissioned by Jesus himself to proclaim the good news that he is risen ... and that through him, all who believe may have eternal life.

Children come to show the adults their pictures ... as we re-tell the Easter Story:

- 1 Jesus shared a Passover meal with his friends.
He said that we should eat bread and drink wine to remember him.
- 2 After praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas came with soldiers.
Judas kissed Jesus, and the soldiers arrested him
- 3 Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus.
The cock crowed, and Peter went outside and wept.
- 4 Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor.
The crowd shouted "Crucify him!"
- 5 Jesus was crucified with two robbers.
He said: "Father, forgive them, They don't know what they are doing."
- 6 When Jesus died, his friends laid his body in a tomb.
A large stone was rolled across the entrance.
- 7 On the third day, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.
She found that the stone had been rolled away.
- 8 Mary ran back to tell Peter and John.
They went to the tomb to see for themselves.
- 9 Mary sat crying outside the tomb.
Two angels told her that Jesus was alive ... and then she saw him!
- 10 Mary went to tell the others that Jesus had risen.
The disciples didn't really believe her.

Remember the stone across the entrance of the tomb? It was big and it was heavy ... but it wasn't able to keep Jesus in ... and there is nothing which is a barrier or burden to us ... no

'stone' of doubt or unbelief which is too big or too heavy that God cannot shift it.

As we sing our next hymn, take special note of the words of the last verse:

“With a shout you rose victorious, wresting victory from the grave,
And ascending into heaven, leading captives in your wake.
Now you stand before the Father, interceding for your own.
From each tribe and tongue and nation, you are leading sinners home.”

Jesus' death on the cross was no disaster, but the victory over sin and death. Jesus' mighty resurrection is our sure ground for hope in life everlasting.

Jesus is indeed leading sinners home ... let us all be sure that we are among them.