

I am very grateful to Liz and Carol and Bob for building us a scaled down representation of an empty tomb in front of our altar. The empty tomb, with its entrance wide open and no longer obstructed by a large stone rolled in front of it, is the single most expressive and meaningful symbol of Easter. If the image of the empty tomb does not inspire us as Christians and increase our faith and hope and courage in the face of whatever difficulties and challenges we encounter, then quite frankly, nothing will.

The purpose of the large heavy stone placed in front of the entrance to a tomb – Jesus’ tomb, or any tomb – was to separate the dead from the living. To keep them apart, permanently. That was how many people way back then, and many people still today, view death ... as the end, after which there is nothing, just perpetual darkness. Which is what makes the image of the empty tomb, its entrance stone moved off to the side, so powerful. It tells us that nothing, nothing at all, not even death, will keep Jesus the Christ, the son of God, apart from God’s people, apart from us. The empty tomb, its entrance wide open and Jesus no longer its captive, is the sign, our sign, that resurrection is real.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from death to life is without exception the most momentous, most mysterious, most magnificent, most world-changing event in all human history. It was an event that still perplexes us today, but it also perplexed the people who witnessed it 2000 years ago at the first Easter. Look at how the disciples and Mary Magdalene, about whom we just read in the gospel account of John, responded when they encountered the empty tomb. Remember, these were the people who knew Jesus better than anyone. They had spent several years with him. Jesus had spoken to them numerous times about his future death and resurrection. He had looked them in the eye and warned them of what was to come. They had even seen, firsthand, Jesus raise other people from the dead. Yet, as we just read, when the disciples ran away from the empty tomb, they did not understand what they had just seen. As for Mary’s response, we are told that she talked to two angels at the tomb who confirmed Jesus’ resurrection, and still she wept and was confused.

It turns out that the people who were the most in the know did not know what was going on that first Easter morning. They were not even close to figuring it out on their own.

I must confess, I do not fully understand the resurrection either. I know that I never will, during my lifetime. You will never fully understand the resurrection either, during your lifetime. But I do believe in the resurrection to eternal life even if I cannot explain it. I know that I will never comprehend fully the resurrection until I die and am resurrected to my new life with Christ. You will never fully comprehend the resurrection until you die and are resurrected to your new life with Christ.

In the meantime, the glorious Easter message of Jesus’ resurrection is that Christ is present now and at work in the world through us. Is that so hard to believe? The Easter message is that the risen Christ can be encountered every day, even in our most mundane and ordinary moments, if only we have the eyes to see. Is that so hard to believe?

The Easter message for Christian believers is that for as long as we have life, we must continually keep pushing aside the stones that entomb us and separate us from God. This little poem by Janet Morley expresses it well:

“When we are all despairing,
When the world is full of grief,
When we see no way ahead, and hope had gone away,
Roll back the stone.”

Although we fear change,

although we are not ready,
although we would rather weep and run away,
Roll back the stone.

Because we hope where hope is vain,
Because you call us from the grave and show the way,
Roll back the stone.”

Has it been your experience that life inevitably presents us with a succession of stones, by which I mean events and circumstances that block us, diminish us, complicate our lives, and like the stone that once blocked the entrance to Jesus’ tomb, come between us and the complete peace that God offers us? How successful have you been at pushing those stones aside?

Perhaps you are familiar with the Greek legend of Sisyphus, a mortal who fell out of favour with Zeus, king of the gods. Sisyphus was condemned by Zeus to spend the rest of his life with one and only one task to accomplish. He was expected to push a giant stone up and over the top of a high hill. During his first attempt, Sisyphus started at the base of the hill, trying with all his might to move the large stone up the steep slope. He succeeded at getting it near the top, almost over the hill, but he was fatigued, and the weight of the stone and the pull of gravity caused the stone to tumble back down to the base of the hill. Repeatedly, Sisyphus tried to push that stone up and over the hilltop, each time coming close to achieving his goal. But every time, the same thing occurred, and the stone came tumbling back down. As legend has it, Sisyphus is still to this very day repeatedly pushing that stone up the hill.

The story of Sisyphus and his struggles with the unyielding stone is a fitting metaphor for the human condition when life repeatedly places obstacles in the way of our complete peace and happiness. Obstacles which, regardless of their nature, can be minimized by our allowing the Spirit of the risen Christ to share our burdens. The message of the empty tomb at Easter is that we never need to face our challenges alone. We do not need to struggle on our own, like Sisyphus, enduring repeatedly the pain and heartache of forces and disappointments seemingly beyond our power to defeat.

The risen Christ, who refused to be confined by the stone blocking his tomb, will help us to push aside the obstacles in our life, if only we have faith enough to trust in God.

Have you heard of the “Welcoming Prayer”? It is a prayer that helps us find serenity amid all those messy moments in life, not by running away from problems and difficulties, but by welcoming them as we welcome the risen Christ to share the burdens with us. This is the “Welcoming Prayer.” You might want to adopt it as one of your regular prayers:

“Welcome, welcome, welcome.
I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it is for my healing.
I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.
I let go of my desire for power and control.
I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.
I let go of my desire for survival and security.
I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself.
I open to the love and presence of God and God’s action within. Amen.”

Throughout his ministry Jesus encountered profound brokenness in the world, and he went about reversing that brokenness. Where he found sickness, he healed people; where he found hunger, he fed people; where he found sin and death, he brought forgiveness and resurrection. Wherever people were feeling stuck or trapped, their past experiences telling them that things will never change, their world lost in grief and pain, Jesus created for those who were prepared to listen to him new hopes and dreams for their lives. Easter is a time for new hopes and dreams.

Alistair McGrath is a Christian theologian who wrote about an American soldier serving in the army during the Second World War who was captured and held in a Japanese prison camp in Singapore. Day after excruciating day in that prison camp, for weeks and then months and then years on end, the man wondered if he was going to die or live to see another day. He wondered what was happening to his fallen comrades, whether they were still alive, whether they were there in the same prison camp as him. He wondered how the war was going on in the rest of the world. Who was winning? What was happening?

Finally, after several years as a prisoner of war, the man received word that the war had ended. One of the other prisoners in the camp heard broadcast over a short-wave radio that the Japanese had surrendered, and the Allied forces had won. Hearing the news, the man sat in disbelief and rejoiced.

But then he realized that although everything had changed – the war, after all, had been won – nothing about his own dire situation as a captive deep in the jungles of Singapore had changed. It would take many more weeks if not months before he and the other prisoners were found in their prison camp and liberated. In the meantime, they continued to live as before, surviving on putrid starvation rations, in inhumane conditions, under the brutal watch of their captors.

But even though their day-to-day problems had not changed, there was something about the guarantee of victory that changed the prisoners' perspective and their outlook. They now had reason to hope and to believe that they were not destined to suffer without end. They knew that in time their victory was assured. Soon the prisoners' attitude changed. They were still prisoners, but they acted like they were already free. They celebrated. They sang songs. They laughed and they cried tears of relief together, because they knew that their victory was assured.

The promise of Easter is much the same. The promise of Easter is God's assurance to each one of us that no matter how difficult, or troubled, or challenging our current circumstances might be, our eventual victory as believers in the resurrected Christ is assured. We have nothing to fear, not even death, because our saviour Jesus Christ has rolled back the stone door of death and is forever with us.

One final thing: on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalen went to Jesus' tomb. According to John's gospel, she was the first person to witness that Jesus' body was not there. She carried that message to the disciples, convincing them that they needed to come and see for themselves what had happened. "I have seen the Lord," was the good news she told the disciples, and the disciples in turn told others the good news, who in turn told others, and they told others, and so on and so on throughout the centuries until eventually someone told you and me about this good news.

Now it is our responsibility to let others know, through our everyday words and actions, that Christ is risen.

Remember, roll back the stone – in whatever shape that stone takes – if it separates you from the peace and love that the Risen Christ wants you to have in your life. Happy Easter, everyone. **Amen.**