

THE MYSTERY OF THE ROLLING STONE

Mark 16:1-4

This morning we are considering the mystery of the rolling stone – nothing to do with Mick Jagger or the gathering of moss. It is the mystery of the stone rolled away on Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the tomb.

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.

The stone in front of the tomb is a prominent feature of the Gospel accounts of Jesus resurrection. In our Easter hymns & songs we celebrate the fact the stone was rolled away from the tomb. *"Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away"*.

Archaeology has helped fill out the picture. First century tombs have been unearthed in and around Jerusalem and many were designed to have a large stone over the entrance. *"Simple tombs have a small doorway, 1 metre (3ft high), closed by a boulder which fitted like a plug, or by a stone slab. It was essential to close tombs tightly because wild animals, dogs, jackals, hyenas, which were always scavenging outside ancient towns, would enter and tear up the bodies."* (A. Millard 'Discoveries from the Time of Jesus' Lion. 1990)

Matthew's Gospel gives us information about the large stone in front of the entrance to the tomb where Jesus was laid and gives extra detail about a seal put on the stone – because of fears that Jesus' disciples might rob the tomb and claim Jesus had risen. (See Matthew 27:57-66)

Mark's Gospel records the anxieties of the women as they walk to the tomb. They had set out to anoint the body not thinking ahead about the stone (and maybe unaware of the seal or the guards). Now they were worried about how they would move the stone. These stones were not only large and heavy – they were like cartwheels set in a sloping groove. It was easy to roll the stone down the slope, but not so easy to roll it back again. It would take several strong men. And then Mark records their genuine astonishment on finding that the stone had been rolled back already!

All this is vivid eye-witness testimony. It is detail that tells us this actually happened. It was seen and reported by people on the spot. And the human reactions are plain to see.

So, how had this happened? Who moved the stone? Matthew 28:1-7 tells us that an awesome angel whose *"appearance was like lightning and whose clothes were white as snow"* came down from heaven causing a violent earthquake – and rolled away the stone. Then the angel sat on the stone!

Breathtaking! You surely didn't expect such a momentous event as the raising of the Son of God to be without some other supernatural accompaniments!

So much for *what* happened – but today I'm more interested in *why*. Why was the stone rolled away? There's a mystery here. The mystery of the rolling stone!

You might think it was it to let Jesus out. But Jesus didn't need the stone to be rolled away in order to get out. We know from His resurrection appearances that Jesus could suddenly appear in a room where the door was locked – and disappear in the same way. (Luke 24v31 and John 20v19 & 26) Nevertheless, the stone was rolled away. Why?

1. The stone was announcing the good news

In the Bible it isn't just people who proclaim glorious truth. The planets do so. The wonders of creation do so. (See for example Psalm 148) On Palm Sunday the Pharisees wanted Jesus to rebuke His disciples for shouting out "*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!*" But Jesus replied, "*I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!*" (Luke 19v38-40) Here, a large stone proclaims glorious truth! It announces that the tomb is empty. The angel who "*sat on*" it (v2) gave voice to the stone's message. "*He is not here. He is risen.*" (v6) Sin and death have been defeated. This is a new day, a new age! Now life all its fullness is available through faith in Jesus Christ.

The women were not expecting Jesus to be raised; nor were the men who had followed Jesus. He had spoken of rising from the dead but they hadn't understood. In 1st century Jewish thinking resurrection was expected at the end of history, when God would raise all men and women to judgment. No one was expecting *one man* to be raised ahead of the general resurrection. But now, in the middle of history, the stone had been rolled away! One man, Jesus, had been raised from the dead. The rolling stone was announcing this.

This message of Jesus being raised from the dead was at the heart of the Christian faith from the beginning. Belief in Jesus' resurrection didn't emerge gradually. The stone wasn't moved centimetre by centimetre over decades! It was rolled away in a moment. Jesus burst from the tomb and the message was proclaimed *on the same day*. Mary Magdalene saw the stone and a few minutes later she saw Jesus, and talked to Him and went on to announce His resurrection that same glorious day! '*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!"*' (John 20v18)

2. The stone was proclaiming a physical resurrection.

The fact that the stone was rolled away says something important about the nature of Jesus' resurrection. It was a material, physical event. This was a *bodily* resurrection. Perhaps Jesus *did* use the normal exit, even passing the stone as He did so. He didn't need to of course. But there is every chance that

He did, because this was a *physical* resurrection. Jesus was not a disembodied spirit.

His body was undoubtedly different, but it was still a physical body. The apostle Paul describes Jesus' resurrection body as a "spiritual body". (1 Corinthians 15v35-50) But what does this mean? Michael Lloyd writes: *"Many of our Easter hymns and songs and sermons celebrate the fact that Jesus is alive. Few capture just how alive. It is possible to read the accounts of the Resurrection appearances in Luke's Gospel and come to the conclusion that, if He can walk through walls, then it must be a fairly insubstantial and non-physical existence that He has, the other side of the grave. That, I suggest, is to miss the point. Jesus Himself, in Luke 24v37f, insists that He is no ghost, and eats fish in the disciples' presence to prove His (transformed) physicality. It is not that He is so insubstantial that He can walk through walls. It is that He is so substantial and so real that walls are insubstantial and unreal in comparison. Walls are so much less 'solid' than Jesus' resurrection body that they can offer no resistance to Him."*

So Jesus' resurrection body was a truly physical one – only much more so! Lloyd goes on: *"The play and film about C.S. Lewis' life, 'Shadowlands', was so named because of his insistence that it is this world that is the shadowlands; it is the next world, the coming new creation (already arrived in the resurrection of Jesus) that is the real land and the real life. What we learn from the resurrection of Jesus is that we are shadows of our future selves."* (Michael Lloyd. 'Cafe Theology', Alpha International. 2005)

3. The stone was inviting those on the outside to come in

The moving of the stone was not to let the One inside get out; it was to let those on the outside get in! The stone was saying *"Come in! Have a look around. This is not a dark place anymore. Don't stand weeping on the outside. Come on in! This is not a place of death and sorrow and fear and despair. He is not here. He has risen!"*

Do you know, I think the most surprising detail of the Easter story is not that Jesus was raised from the dead but the fact that the Son Of God died at all - and was laid in a tomb! The One who was there at the beginning of Creation was a corpse lying on a slab on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The stone was over the entrance through those dark hours.

Jesus shared this most bitter aspect of our humanity – death, He was laid out in the dark tomb. The Psalmist had said he feared no evil when walking through the valley of the shadow of death, because the Lord his Shepherd was with Him. Now that is supremely true because Jesus passed through that valley. And then the stone was rolled away and light streamed in, and Jesus rose from the dead. When that stone rolled away it was in glorious anticipation of the day of resurrection at the end of history!

4. The stone was pointing to something more amazing

That's what signs do; they point away from themselves. In John 20v1 we read: '*Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance*'. The stone prepared Mary gently for what lay ahead. God seems to love subtle signs. He leaves clues rather than blast us in the eye with incontrovertible evidence. He enjoys making us "*wonder*".

So the stone was a sign pointing Mary to something much more wonderful. By themselves a rolled stone and an empty tomb wouldn't prove much. If a body went missing from the mortuary at West Road Crematorium you wouldn't rush to the conclusion that there had been a resurrection. The real evidence was not the stone or the empty tomb; it was what they pointed to. Mary didn't just see a stone rolled away; she saw Jesus Himself!

That is why there is no desire in the New Testament to venerate the stone or the empty tomb – that started some 200-300 years later. (I suspect people start to venerate shrines and relics when they lose touch with the dynamic, living reality of the risen Christ!) So the disciples didn't carefully treasure the stone. You can't go to the Israel Museum to view it. Something much more exciting than an angel moving a stone had happened. Jesus was alive! Mary saw the stone but she soon forgot about it because she saw Jesus Himself!

That's what evidence is meant to do. Some look at the evidence for the resurrection, perhaps even find it compelling, but reject it. In one of his books, the late Sir Norman Anderson, a distinguished academic and Christian, recalled a conversation with a professor of philosophy who agreed that the evidence for Jesus' resurrection was strong; but he refused to accept the evidence because "*it simply could not have happened.*" (Quoted by John Young in 'The Case Against Christ', Hodder 1986)

Others, like journalist Frank Morison, have looked at the same evidence and come to faith. He wrote about his search and even called the book 'Who Moved the Stone?'

What about you? What do you make of the mystery of the rolling stone?

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