

Easter - Year B - 1 April 2018

St George's Episcopal Church, Texas City

Deacon Joseph Mills

[RCL] Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Mark 16:1-8

Opening Prayer ---

In the darkness on the third day after their rabbi's execution, three women check one last time to make sure they have everything they need. Followers of Jesus in his lifetime, they want to be faithful to their teacher in death. Jesus had been robbed of a proper Jewish burial as his death came right on the verge of the Sabbath. The women intend to make this one thing right in a universe turned hopelessly away from God. The Twelve are hiding in a locked room with other disciples for fear they will be found out as followers of Jesus. Meanwhile, the women prepare to be at the tomb as dawn breaks.

In purely human terms, the story of the would-be Messiah from Nazareth in Galilee has come to a brutal end. For the Roman colonial government, Jesus is a minor statistic, yet another Jewish revolutionary crucified in Rome's ongoing efforts to preserve the peace in Palestine. The ringleader, Jesus, has been publically and cruelly killed. His disciples have vanished for fear of a similar fate. For the keepers of the status quo, this has been a successful Passover festival. Jesus' movement is buried with its leader.

The women arrive at the tomb and looming large is an insurmountable obstacle between them and their task. The women know they don't have the strength to budge the great stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. As they walk to the garden, they wonder, "Who will roll the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"

Our Gospel reading for this morning tells us that the women then looked up. The original Greek text [*anablepo*] for this can also mean the women looked again. The women come upon the tomb and as they expected, the stone is rolled in front of the entrance. They don't stand a chance of getting near Jesus on their own. Then they look again, or perhaps do a double take, and realize that the stone has been rolled away.

Mark has already prepared us for this need to do a double take. It works something like bi-focal vision in Mark's Gospel. Twice in the Gospel, Jesus has healed blind men and allowed them to see again. The word used to describe the two blind men seeing again is the same one used here, to look again [*anablepo*]. Already in those stories of healing the blind, there was a sense in which spiritual healing allowed the men to see again with physical sight.

In Mark's Gospel, faith gives us the ability to see the world as God sees it. We gain bifocal vision. When we look with the eyes of the world, we see the obstacles and problems. The stone blocks our path and it is too large for us to even budge. We look with the eyes of faith and a different picture comes into focus. God has already removed the obstacles that we could not remove by our own power.

This is seen most clearly in the Easter story. The three women are blocked by an obstacle, which they stood no chance of removing on their own. They ask one another, "Who will roll away the stone?" Yet, when they look again through the eyes of faith, they see that the stone has already been rolled away. The Greek here is in the perfect tense. The stone that blocks their way is already long gone when they do the Easter double take and see the world as God sees it.

What are the stones that need to be rolled away in your life? Is the obstacle one of relationships that can't be made right? Or is

your path blocked by an addiction to alcohol, drugs, or some other destructive cycle from which you don't have the power to break free? All of us can find our way blocked by obstacles too big to budge. The story of Easter tells us that God offers the ultimate leverage to remove the obstacles in your way.

If you rely on your own might, your own abilities, your own wisdom, the stone in your way will be more than you can face. Period. But, when you have the courage to admit you don't have the power to remove the obstacle, you can turn the problem over to God. Then with the eyes of faith, you may come in time to see that the insurmountable obstacle has been rolled away.

Yet, that is not the end of the Gospel reading. The Bible is if nothing else, the most realistic of books, and today's reading is no exception. The women enter the tomb to find an angel, a divine messenger, with the news that Jesus has been raised from the dead and has gone ahead of his disciples to Galilee. It would be wonderful to report that the women were immediately filled with joy.

Instead, we are told that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome fled from the tomb seized by terror and stricken with awe. Rather than spreading the joy of resurrection, we are told, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It is there that the reading ends. Mark's Gospel offers the challenge of a circular story. The Gospel begins with Jesus in Galilee challenging people to come and follow him; at the close of the story, Jesus has once more gone ahead into Galilee holding out the offer of discipleship to any who will come and follow him.

What about you? Would you have the courage to leave the empty tomb and go back to Galilee to take up the task of being Jesus' disciple now that you know the way of discipleship led to

the cross and the grave? Even with the triumph of Easter, we can fearfully retreat now that we know the cost of discipleship.

The Gospel offers a dual challenge this Easter. The first is to look at the very real obstacles in your life with the eyes of faith. The things that you are powerless to change are not obstacles to God. Through grace, you can see that God has already removed the problems plaguing you, if you just have the faith to push ahead.

But the second prong of the challenge of the Gospel comes when you push ahead. Just as the women found the stone rolled away only to be struck dumb with terror and awe at the news of Jesus' resurrection, we too can lose our focus and stop seeing the world as God sees it. The second challenge then is the harder one. Once you have seen that God can remove the obstacles blocking your way, then you must follow where Jesus leads.

The three women that morning did break free from fear. We know that they were all active in the earliest Christian church. They found the courage to follow Jesus even after they had learned the cost they might have to one day pay for their faith in him.

Jesus will remove the obstacles from your path if you will stop trying to remove them by your own might. Then he will give you the grace to continue the journey. The path is open to each of us. Jesus is still out there beckoning, "Follow me" to those who listen. We only need respond by faith and say yes to the invitation.

***For Alleluia! Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!***