



Good morning and Happy Easter! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Welcome to our Sunrise Service; we are grateful you are here, and we are grateful for our hard-working deacons, who have prepared such a wonderful smelling breakfast we will enjoy in, oh, I should have you eating by 9:00 a.m.:)

Our Scripture text this morning, of course, is one of the passages that tell of the resurrection. For this service, I chose the story of the resurrection from Mark's gospel, and I did so because of one particular line that I want to use as our theme this morning. Follow along with me as I read that passage.

Mark 16:1-4 –

*1 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.*

*2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb*

*3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"*

*4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.*

*5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

*6 "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.*

*7 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.'"*

*8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

*9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.*

*10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.*

*11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.*

*12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country.*

*13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.*

*14 Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*

The phrase that I want to use as a theme for this message is the question the women asked each other in verse 3 – *Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?* I want to use that verse as one that symbolizes the figurative stones that hold us in our own tombs. Though we are healthy and alive, in a symbolic way, we are held captive by powerful forces in life, forces that keep us trapped as though we are locked in a tomb behind a stone, a stone that seems too powerful to roll away. But the resurrection of Jesus is a power that not only brings about a future salvation; it is a power that brings salvation from those forces that bind us in life.

So what are some of those forces? Let's look at a few of them this morning.

### 1. *The Stone of Fear.*

How many of you consider yourselves adventurous, or are formerly adventurous? Perhaps you like to do things that take some measure of courage or daring. I have this theory that we partake in adventurous experiences for a couple of reasons, and one of those reasons is to prove to ourselves that we can conquer fear.

For me, one of the ways to deal with fear has been to get on roller coasters. I understand that may seem like a strange way to deal with fear, but for most of my early life I could not muster up the courage to get on a roller coaster. I finally conquered my fear of roller coasters when I was in my mid 20s and serving as a student minister. On an outing to King's Island, some of the kids invited me to ride some of the roller coasters with them. Sensing my apprehension, one of them invited me to try a smaller one first, which consisted of a single loop. My fear of appearing frightened in front of a group of junior high and high school students evidently outweighed my fear of roller coasters, so I climbed aboard, survived and have been hooked on riding ever since. My enjoyment of riding roller coasters was greatly tested one other time, however. Several years ago, when I was in Orlando for the General Assembly, David, his daughters Marjorie and Maureen, Mike Gatton, and I, took a trip to Universal Studios Theme Park. There are two parks, one right next to the other, and in one of the parks is a very challenging roller coaster. After boarding the coaster it climbs a 90-degree hill. That's right – straight up! Going up that hill I wondered what the hill would be like when we went down. Well, it was about an 88-degree angle. I was riding with Marjorie and Maureen and I didn't want to appear afraid, but it wasn't long before I was screaming like a baby.

Perhaps you have something you do, just to prove to yourself that you can overcome your fear. I think all of us have something we do in order to try and conquer fear, because fear is a pervasive force in all of our lives. All of us struggle with fear. All of us feel, at times, as though we are trapped behind a stone of fear. This is why I often mention fear in my messages, because it is a part of life for all of us. We fear for the future that faces our children and grandchildren. We fear the test results that the doctor shares. We fear for our employment and financial security. We fear so many things.

All of us pray and ask God to help us overcome our fears. I believe faith can certainly help us to overcome our fears, but fear is so deeply entrenched in our lives that we sometimes wonder if even faith can help us. How many of you, for instance, have struggled with I John 4:18? Do you know that verse? It's the famous verse about fear that says *there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.* Have you ever wondered why that perfect love has not cast out fear from your life? Have you tried and tried to conquer fear but just cannot manage to do so?

Fear has been a constant companion to me in life. In fact, in my early years of ministry I often found myself overwhelmed with fear. If I seem comfortable in front of a group of people I can assure you that this is not my natural habitat. As a child, as an adolescent, and as a young adult, I was very quiet, reserved, and shy. Entering minister, which is such a public role, was very difficult for me. My earliest sermons were very frightening for me and it took a long time for me to become comfortable in front of a group of people, although it is still not easy for me. I still feel the burden of fear often upon me as I

think about the burden of being the minister of this church, the pastor to its people, and how to live up to that calling. I stand in front of families to try and speak comfort to them when they have lost loved ones and I often feel the fear that I do not have the adequate words to bring comfort and hope.

But we're in good company when it comes to fear. Peter, when he followed Jesus after his arrest, when further than the other disciples, but when questioned if he were one of the followers of Jesus, three times he denied knowing Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three times! Fear got the best of him. Thomas, who was famous for his doubt, was also afraid. I think Thomas' doubt was a form of fear, as he was, perhaps, afraid to believe this incredible news about the resurrection. What if it turned out not to be true? Could he handle the disappointment?

Let God roll away the stone of fear! Let the power of the risen Christ roll that stone away! You do not have to remain entombed behind the stone of fear! Allow God to roll it away!

## 2. *The Stone of Regret.*

I do not understand those who say they have no regrets. In fact, not only do I not understand them, I don't believe them either. Everyone has regrets in life, regardless of whether or not they will admit it.

I have sat at a lot of hospital bedsides, as people faced their last moments, and listened to the deep, deep heartbreak of regret. I have listened to many people over the years, in broken voices, speak of their regrets that weigh heavily upon them. I have listened to many people, in counseling sessions, tearfully share their regrets, regrets that steal away their joy. Regret has not only broken many hearts, it has also entombed many people.

When I think of Biblical examples of regret I think of the story of Joseph and his brothers, which is such a powerful, powerful story (Genesis 37 – 50). Even before Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, you can sense their regret. Imagine what it was like for them over the years after selling their brother Joseph into slavery. I imagine that every one of the brothers thought about Joseph and wondered what became of him. They must have imagined what his life in slavery was like, and whether or not he was still alive. The regret surely kept them up at night and weighed heavily upon their hearts. And then, imagine the regret that must have poured out when Joseph does reveal himself to them (Genesis 45:1-15). Not only regret, but fear as well (Genesis 45:3). But so much regret. So many years of wondering what had happened after they sold their brother into slavery. So many years that had passed by and so much time lost to a family.

I imagine Peter had regret as well. Even though he was restored by Jesus after his denials, I imagine that Peter took his regret for his denials to his final breath. Perhaps some people reminded Peter from time to time about those denials. People do, unfortunately, like to remind us of our failures, which compounds our sense of regret.

And there is Paul, as well. I imagine that Paul had a great deal of regret about his role in the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54 – 8:1. 8:1 says that *Saul was there, giving approval to his death*) and for his role in the persecution of the followers of Jesus (Acts 8:1-3). Perhaps people reminded Paul of those failures, adding to his regret.

What are your regrets? You might not be able to change every situation, but you can do what you can, and then you let it go. Let the power of the resurrection roll away the stone of regret! Do not be entombed by your regret! That stone of regret might be too heavy for you to move, but allow the power of the resurrection to take away your regrets!

## 3. *The Stone of Perfection.*

All of us feel the weight of expectation in our lives. There is always someone who is ready to place the heavy burden of expectation upon us. Sometimes, those expectations are so heavy that we believe we must live up to a standard of perfection. Sometimes, parents place such a heavy weight of expectation upon their children that the children feel they must be perfect in order to earn their parents

love. Sometimes, one spouse places so much expectation upon the other that they believe they must be perfect in order to be loved. Sometimes, we believe that we must be perfect in order to earn the love and the grace of God, and in our efforts to achieve perfection we become not only unhappy, we become trapped in a faith that is legalistic and rigid.

You might be thinking at this point, *but what about the remarks of Jesus, in Mathew 5:48, “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Well, that is a good question about an often misunderstood verse. Jesus, in that verse, is not speaking about moral perfection, which is impossible for us to achieve. The word that is translated as *perfect* is one that carries that meaning of *complete* or *whole*. In one way, we can think of that completeness or wholeness as being like a machine or mechanical device in which the various parts work together in harmony so that the device is able to fulfill its desired effect. Being perfect, in that sense, is to reflect the purpose of God, working in harmony with the other parts of the body of Christ to fulfill our function and calling as followers of Jesus. In this sense, it is much like what Paul has to say about the body in I Corinthians 12:12-31. We do not, then, have to be perfect in order to earn love; certainly we do not have to be perfect in order to earn God’s love.

You don’t have to be perfect! Isn’t that good news? So don’t worry about the people who think you ought to be not only better than you are, but who think you should be perfect.

#### 4. *The Stone of Grief.*

There are many messages in the resurrection, and one is certainly an answer to grief. On Easter, when we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, we can, and should, speak of our own resurrection.

I have officiated at a lot of funerals over the years. Hundreds, I’m sure. I have officiated at funerals for babies, children, teenagers, young adults, middle-age adults, and older adults. There is not an age group for which I have not officiated a funeral. I have officiated at funerals for family members as well, none of which was more difficult than that of my father’s.

Grief is a companion for all of us. Scratch just lightly in the life of another person and there is some kind of grief that will be released. It is hard to imagine the amount of grief upon the women who went to the tomb on the first Easter morning. They were witnesses to what may be the most brutal form of execution ever devised by humanity. Because Passover was imminent they were not able to prepare the body of Jesus for burial, so they had to wait until Sunday morning to finish their task. This meant that the women could not begin their grieving process, and they had to think about the difficult task ahead for them on Sunday morning. Grief, certainly, had overwhelmed them. The disciples were also dealing with their own grief, in hiding in the upper room, and who could blame them? They were afraid of what might happen to them and grief was their grief was heavy upon them as they wondered what was their next step in life. Though they experienced the resurrection of Jesus, we cannot minimize the grief that was upon them before the truth of the resurrection came to them. Imagine, then, the joy in discovering that Jesus was alive!

Easter is a time to celebrate resurrection, and with the promise of resurrection comes the promise that grief is washed away in that glorious moment of being reunited with those who have gone before. That does not, certainly, minimize the pain of loss and separation we experience when we lose a friend or loved one. The pain of separation is with us all of our days, but where would we be without the hope that resurrection brings? Imagine how different life would be if not for the hope that we have of resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for our own hope of resurrection. It is the foundation that reminds us of the truth of Paul’s words when he wrote *where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?* (I Corinthians 15:55). The resurrection provides the promise that death is not an end, but a transition. When we take our final breath in this life we take our first breath in eternity. When we close our eyes to life in this world we open them to life in the world of eternity.

Who will roll away these stones in your life – the stone of fear, the stone of regret, the stone of

perfection, and the stone of grief? We cannot do it ourselves, but the power of the risen Christ is able! Live as Easter people – put away your fears, be released from your regrets, give up the quest for perfection, and allow the promise of resurrection remove your grief!

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Be risen with Him as He rolls away the stones!