

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015)

Text: **Mark 16:1-8** (NRSV)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Who Will Roll Away the Stone?"**

I never know the journey God will take us on each week. Especially in a week like this and on a Sunday such as today – so familiar to all of us. Easter Sunday. Resurrection Sunday. The day Christ rose from the dead. 'Nuff said. Right?

Well, maybe, but God is still speaking you know and asked me to share some thoughts with you!

As I read this familiar account of the story from our intrepid gospel writer Mark – you know Mark, the one who would have been first in line for a smart phone? If he could have tweeted the Gospel I'm sure he would have as his only-the-most-important-parts gospel shows. Our lectionary for today also gave us John's gospel account of the same triumphant story, but he takes 425 words to tell the story as opposed to Mark's scant 195 – less than half! I bet he could have gotten it down to 140 characters if he'd had to. It's almost as if John sat there contemplating the story and Mark decided it was more a "just the facts, m'aam" kind of guy. Both valid, but for some reason Mark's excitement and pithiness caught my attention this season.

What jumped out at me from Mark's gospel this season was the phrase Salome and the two Marys were discussing on their way to the tomb..."Who will roll away the stone for us...?" For them it was a very practical question. They knew the three of them wouldn't have enough physical strength to do the job, and they were probably pretty certain the disciples weren't going to be there since they had apparently been planning this early morning visit since Christ's body had been taken from the cross and hastily prepared for burial.

Bible researcher B.L. Cocherell writes that although, "The historical record is vague on this point... we know that the women who prepared the spices felt it was necessary to apply more spices and ointment to the body, either as an additional show of honor and respect or out of necessity in order to finalize the process."

Do I have to tell you how much I love these women and their attention to detail? I truly believe the Christian church would never have made it to this point without all the faithful women throughout the ages taking care of the details and putting others first as Christ calls us to do in our lives. As a male of the species, I feel I can get away with praising women and dissing my own kind a little bit this morning.

I had to laugh at myself, actually, when I realized how much I still have to learn about giving and thoughtfulness during our Maundy Thursday service at Montebello a few days ago. I laugh at

myself quite a bit, you should know, and highly recommend it as a good way God helps us with our humility. And, of course, it was a lesson I learned from a woman as I often have throughout my life, and I'm sure many of you have as well. It was a simple thing, really. Someone was coughing during the service – rather loud and quite often and it was annoying me. But the dear sister sitting beside me didn't make a face like I did, but simply dug in her purse to supply a cough drop, which was passed down the aisle and gratefully received by the poor cougher. And there it was. I realized that instead of thinking about her need, I had just, once again, thought about MY need to not be irritated.

Throughout our lives we will find these kinds of pesky stones that need to be rolled away in order for the light to shine. Many times it will be as simple as having someone roll a cough drop down the aisle for us to get it, and other times, we will need lots of help to roll whatever it is that may be blocking our vision and our understanding away in the tomb of our consciousness.

I'm sure you remember my Easter reflections from last year when I spoke about the size and heft of the stone researchers believe covered the entrance to Jesus' tomb. No? Well, it was big and it was heavy. Trust me.

But today I'm not so much interested in the largeness of the stone as I am in what the stone may represent in our lives and why we so often think we need others to roll it away for us.

How long do you think it would have taken for the disciples or anyone else for that matter to realize that Jesus had risen just as He said if the women had sat around their house, knowing they couldn't move the stone and convinced that nobody else could move it for them, either.

I think there's a true measure of their faith in the fact that they went anyway. They knew they wanted to honor and bless Jesus and perform a ritual of love for Him with their spices, so even though they had no idea how it was going to happen, they went anyway.

How many times in my life... in your life... do we allow the stones in our shoes or in our way to stop us? How many times do we roll stones into our own paths to keep us from following God's leading? How often do we talk ourselves out of something because we're looking at the stones in our way instead of having faith that God will help us move them or have them moved before we even get there?

As I was reflecting on this passage this week, I had to think about how many stones I've erected around my own heart thinking I could protect it in some way. The stones of that particular wall consist of failed relationships, or at least those I've deemed so, past regrets and some, hopefully, crumbling mortar made up of old grudges that God has been chipping away at with me.

I realized that, even without realizing it, I have allowed these stones to keep me from trusting fully, from hoping with abandon, and from loving without fear. These kinds of stones keep us from putting our true trust in God and allowing God to operate freely in our lives. Stones like these prevent new life from happening in the same way a bunch of stones spread thick on the ground can keep any new plant growth to a minimum.

Ah, but even there God can work. God never gives up on us. God always wishes new life for us. God plants seed after seed and sometimes, even through all the stones, a shoot will spring forth and break apart all those stones we think we've placed so carefully to keep us "safe" or "protected."

As you know, our God is a God of surprises. Even when the stones in our lives are not of our own creation and feel like they're being hurled at us, God can step in and create a new pattern for our lives, show us where we can grow and prosper and heal us in new way we hardly ever see for ourselves.

"Jesus' death and resurrection becomes a pattern for our own spiritual evolution," Bruce Sanguin writes in his brilliant book, "If Darwin Prayed" as he ponders the stones that keep us from our own evolution.

"As we die to all the old narratives, beliefs, and assumptions that keep us attached to our small, egotistical selves, we are raised into a larger, broader, and more encompassing Self – an Easter Self of cosmic proportions, motivated not by fear and mere survival but by the prospect of being an agent of sacred, evolutionary intelligence, capable of being a source of new life and the presence of love that is always rising up in the service of life."

Today and throughout the weeks of Easter to come, I encourage you to be aware of the stones you've created in your own life. What are the old stories or stones that you continue to carry around with you that may be keeping you from new ways of thinking and new ways of growing? Do you have some favorite story-stones that you keep in your pocket and keep you from moving forward? Have you paved your life with these old stones so that you just keep walking around your own circular driveway instead of allowing God to forge a new path for you that leads somewhere else?

We have every right to our story-stones you know. We earned them, after all. Sometimes we do need to keep bringing them out and sharing them with others so that we can gain perspective on them. In a great Sojourner's article called, "Telling Old Stories Again and Again" by Tom Ehrlich (that Kathie sent me) he muses on how much we need to tell our stories and how much we need people to listen to them as he tells about a church workshop he led recently where he just let people talk,

"This story explains why I fall short, seem hesitant or even paralyzed. If you know my story, maybe you can accept me and forgive me," he writes. "For some, the old story was the safe place, the known that kept the scary unknown at bay. As long as I keep telling this story and presenting the me that existed yesterday, I don't have to contemplate the ways I am changing and the tomorrow that worries me." I get it.

I think it is important to contemplate these stories and ask ourselves if they're building us up and helping us move forward as we tell them, or are they weighing us down like stones we keep in our pockets and use to create walls around us or fashion altars to our past? Are these story-stones God can use to build something new in my life or are they something that may now be tossed back into that river of life to be worn down and transformed so that their energy can be used elsewhere?

Who will roll away the stone for us? Hopefully, in partnership with God and with one another, we will! Let us identify the stones in our lives and realize, especially on this day of resurrection, that together we can roll away those stones and allow the brilliant light of Christ to shine forth, bringing new growth, new possibilities and new life for all. Amen.