**“Who Will Roll Away the Stone?”**

A Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014

By the Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Ok, so here’s a quiz. Without looking, picture in your mind, the church lawn that runs along Pine Hill Road. Sticking out of the ground are a couple of trees, a beautiful blue sign that says St. Paul’s on it, and three other kind of peculiar looking things. Does anyone know what they are?

That’s right, they are stones -- large boulders really -- embedded within the hillside. I’m not 100% certain, but based on what I remember from my Geology 101 class, I’m pretty sure that they are something called “Glacial Erratics”. And I’m even more confident that a fourth, much larger one, resting right underneath our church is too. Like icebergs, most of the mass of these stones is still hidden beneath the dirt…but the basement stone is probably the size of all three of the Pine Hill stones combined, if not larger. It is so massive, that when our church was built, the foundation had to be built around it. The next time you’re helping clean water out of the church basement, be sure to look for it. It is hard to miss.

Glacial Erratics are large stones that appear somewhere that they don’t geologically belong – hence the name “erratic”. Perhaps the most famous one that you know about is Plymouth Rock – but there are others, lots of them actually, especially scattered around New England. It’s strange that stones of this particular kind are found where there are because there’s no obvious sources for them nearby. And this begs the question, where did they come from? The scientific evidence strongly suggests that these large stones may have traveled nearly 2,000 miles from their point of origin. And the source of their movement is thought to be the unimaginably massive glaciers that moved through the North American continent during the last ice age, 10,000 years ago.

Can you even imagine a force strong enough to move a giant bolder 2,000 miles? I can’t -- even though I’ve lived through several large earthquakes. I just can’t seem to wrap my brain around the fact that at one point in time, the rock that I step over to reach the basement crawlspaces, probably was part of a hillside somewhere up in Canada. And before there were cars, and trucks, and pulleys, and levers, and even human activity on this continent, some force of nature was able to move such a large stone such a long way. Somehow it happened.

In the verses just before the ones we read this Easter morning, Pontius Pilate orders that Jesus’ tomb be made as secure as possible. A whole detachment of Roman soldiers is sent to “seal” the large stone in place that blocked the entrance to the tomb. There were trying to keep everyone out of there because they were afraid that the disciples would try to fake a resurrection by stealing Jesus body and claiming that he had been raised. So they did everything they could to prevent that from happening. But just like it hadn’t occurred to me that glacial forces beyond my imagination might have moved the stone in our basement, it never occurred to them that a force larger than they could possibly imagine might be able to roll away the stone – that God might be able to accomplish for real, what they feared Jesus’ disciples might try to fake.

Matthew’s Easter Gospel doesn’t tell us explicitly, but I imagine that when the two Mary’s went to the tomb on that first Easter morning, they also couldn’t imagine that a force beyond themselves would move away the stone for them. And in fact, it seems clear that entering the tomb wasn’t even something they thought would be possible. Matthew’s Gospel says that they went, not to enter the tomb, but just to see it. They just accepted that nothing within their power could dislodge the stone. Like the Roman soldiers, their imagination wasn’t big enough either.

When I think of the Easter story, I think of the giant stone as a metaphor, for everything in my life that keeps me separated from the love of God, from the life of redemption and grace that I know Christ longs for me to have. The stone of the Easter Gospel is like the immoveable objects in our own lives. The obstacles we keep trying to go around, or move through, or simply ignore, and…whoops…it’s still there. Sometimes they are internal obstacles – parts of our personality, our biology, or our upbringing, that seem to keep holding us back. Sometimes they are external obstacles – things beyond our control that happen to us, job loss or medical setbacks – that seem to be relentless. And whether they are internal, external, or some combination of the two…no matter what we try, these immoveable objects seem to be forever separating us from the transformation that we know God is hoping for in our lives. They are like the stone that separates the women, and the other disciples, from the good news of Jesus’ rising. And just like Pilate and soldiers, just like the women at the tomb, we also can’t imagine there might be a force large enough to move them.

So, I think of the Easter miracle as having two parts. There is first and foremost Jesus’ victory over death. God’s incredible promise that no matter how bad the bad news of the world gets, how violent, how broken, how tragic -- Jesus’ spirit of love, compassion, and generosity towards others can never be killed. Jesus’ rising from the dead, redeems all of us who participate in Christ’s mission of building an inclusive community of beloved children of God.

But the second part of the Easter miracle isn’t about what happened to Jesus inside the tomb, it’s about God helping people to see it. It’s the miracle of God rolling away the stone, so that Jesus’ friends could learn of his rising and begin to try and make sense of what it means for them. After all, the resurrection wouldn’t mean very much if it stayed a secret. If the angel hadn’t rolled away the stone, the women would not have perceived Jesus rising. They would not have gone to Galilee to share the news with the other disciples. Their hope would have been lost.

It’s easy for any of us to lose hope in this world sometimes. Too often we get our hearts broken by the ugliness of life, and when that happens it’s like an immoveable stone is keeping us from seeing the glory of the Risen Christ. But today we celebrate our faith that God is always rolling away the stones that keep us from a life of renewed hope – not just for two women two thousand years, but for us. Each one of us has, in some way, at some time in our lives, had God help us clear away a stone from our path that we at one point were convinced, was absolutely immoveable. Do you remember a time when it happened to you?

Of course, it’s never one and done with God…for most of us in life, there’s usually more than one crisis, more than one heartbreak, more than one stone that seems beyond our capacity to move. God helps us clear away one stone, and we can see for ourselves a new life of grace…but just for awhile. Then something happens, we come up against another stone, and we think, oh my, *this* one’s huge, I can’t imagine anything that can move *this* stone.

Whenever that happens to me, I go down to the church basement, and I sit with the large stone down there for awhile. I imagine how far that stone used to be from here. I imagine the hillside in Canada where it was probably formed. And I imagine how powerful the glacial forces must have been to move such a heavy stone so far. Forces beyond my comprehension.

And then I think of God, and how easily God moved away the stone to let the women in so they could see that nothing, not even death, could destroy Christ’s love. And I think about God’s incredible gift to us in making that love permanent and unbreakable; about God’s Easter promise that no matter what, the spirit of generosity and compassion and reconciliation can never be killed. And suddenly, my stone seems a lot smaller. And God seems a lot stronger. And maybe, just maybe, we won’t need another ice age to move my stone, to open my heart again to the love of Jesus for me, for you, and for the whole world. The Lord is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.