

Sermon *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, Easter Sunday 3.31.24

Let me ask you a question: Do you believe in miracles?

Some people believe that miracles are like coincidences with God's finger prints on them. Have you had a coincidence in your life that is unexplainable except by either God's grace or the randomness of the universe? Many believe those are miracles and are outward signs of God's love.

There are others, like myself during college, who doubt miracles. For me, I used to prefer to focus on what we know in science. But, as you'll hear, that stone of doubt has been rolled away. Now I believe in miracles and at time expect them to happen. So, whether you believe in miracles, or you have doubts, I have some stories I'd like to tell you. Chalk them up to coincidences; or, call them miracles; you get to decide.

First, the stone. The women who were at Jesus' side were Jewish. There are particular burial practices for women of the Jewish faith in the 1st century that could not be carried out on Jesus' body shortly after he died. Why? Because the sun had set. It was evening on Friday – the beginning of the Sabbath when no work is to be done. They laid Jesus' body in an empty tomb. The women left at first light on Sunday morning to do what their faith practice says should be done for those you love. But the problem is there is a stone. A large stone; it has been placed against the entrance to the tomb. This was done for a number of reasons. First, a stone is placed in front of every tomb to keep scavenger animals out for obvious (and kind of gross) reasons. But, this is no ordinary tomb and no ordinary person. The Roman Empire wanted its citizens to believe they owned each person's body and for them to fear death. It was the ultimate tool to bring the people into an orderly, unquestioning, society. Jesus destroyed all that. The Jewish faith teaches that we are made in God's image and our bodies were fashioned carefully according to God's plan. And, the Jewish faith holds onto the belief that we when we die we are restored with our family for whom we see no longer. This is the assertion about faith in Abraham and his descendants that all will be reunited. Jesus lived this way; he taught this; and, through his death and resurrection, he showed it to the world. We are God's own possession and God has swallowed up death for ever.

Back to the stone. The Roman guard wanted to show they own bodies and they own death so they rolled a very large, heavy stone in front of the tomb so that his followers would not come and take the body. It is believed the stone is almost my size, round, like a plate, with four holes in each. It would take four soldiers with a staff stuck into each hole to roll it away. A different Gospel account showed that the Roman guard was placed at the tomb to keep watch. The guard is there to keep people away from the tomb and messing with the stone. Thus, the women, headed out at first light on the first Easter Sunday, rightly wondered, *who will roll away the stone?* It was a practical and important question. They'd heard of the stone but there was no practical way to get around it. Yet, in faith, they went to the tomb anyway.

The first miracle of Easter Sunday is that when they arrived, the stone was rolled away. *Ta da!* First miracle: they headed out in faith and in tradition knowing full well the stone was there and, viola, it was removed. It is a miracle.

Miracle two: Jesus was not there; the tomb was empty.

Miracle three: an angel in dazzling white told them to go tell the others that Jesus is alive and to meet him in Galilee. (In other words, get out town where the guard can't find you)

Do you believe in miracles? The women did. They stepped out in faith wondering who will roll away the stone. It was rolled away by the time they go there. And then, boy oh boy, did they hear and witness the miracle of all miracles – Jesus is not here; he is alive; he will see you at the appointed place just as he told you.

Do you have a stone in your life that you are wondering who will roll it away? It is a stone of some sort of medical condition? Is it the stone of a fractured relationship? A stone of depression or hopelessness? What stone do you have that you would like the power of the Holy Spirit to roll out of the way.

I have had stones in my life that I wondered who will roll them away. I do not have the power within myself to roll it, I need God to do it. And the power of the Holy Spirit has rolled the stones away. I believe in miracles because I have experienced them. You may see them as coincidences, or as something else, but I have witnessed stones in my life get moved by no other hand but by God.

The first one, and one of my newly favorite miracles, happened just this morning. Yes, it's a miracle that we are all here. That we're healthy and trusting enough to gather in a place like this. That's a miracle. But, the one I'm thinking of happened at Starbucks. Yep, Starbucks. Most of my Sunday mornings are fueled by either McDonald's or Starbucks; but usually Starbucks. I get there when they warm the ovens, around 6 a.m., I get the largest cold brew coffee they make and I usually get a sausage, egg and cheddar breakfast sandwich. You know, they're really good at making moderate food and coffee. It's not spectacular, it's not below average, it's just, you know, average. And consistent. And it's not free.

Last night, Christi said that I should get something special for breakfast because it's Easter. When I got there, my favorite barista, Darcy, greeted me. She said, "The usual?" which is the sausage, egg and cheddar breakfast sandwich. I said, "It's Easter so I was thinking of something special, like the maple chicken breakfast sandwich." When I got my order, she handed it to me in the fancy bag with handles. I never get the bag with handles; I've seen it, but I've never received it; that's reserved for special people. Anyway, she handed me The Bag. I thought that was a nice Easter gesture – to give me my breakfast in a fancy bag. But, I was in for something more; the bag was heavy. I looked inside and there were two sandwiches. Darcy smiled and said, "One is for you – the maple chicken sandwich – the other is your usual. It's on us. Give it to someone who needs it for Easter." Yeah, that's a miracle! Starbucks doesn't give away food.

Miracle two: I got to church and one of our office people got here at o-dark-thirty before me. (It's a big day with lots of moving parts; she got there early to make sure it was all going to go smoothly) After a brief rundown of the week and of the day's events, I asked her, "Are you hungry? I have a sausage, egg and cheddar sandwich. Would you like it?" She smiled and eagerly took it. You see, she got up early, before breakfast, and headed to church. She was wondering who will roll away the stone of hunger. And here, thanks to Starbucks, I gave her something to eat.

Who will roll away the stone?

As I told you during the season of Lent, Christi and I set out to adopt our two daughters from Russia. There were many miracles that happened along the way. Here is one of them: we flew to Russia 40 days after September 11th. For those of you who had to travel internationally after 9/11, you know the whole world had changed. Same in Russia – we boarded the same type of Boeing jet that the hijackers used; it was a United flight, full to the top with jet fuel for the 12-hour flight, taking off over many important military sites and office buildings in Seattle. There were passengers in line who were of Arab descent (Moscow is a big hub for flights to the Middle East from the west coast of the US). Yet, like the women on their way to the tomb, we took off in faith.

For about six months, or more, the Russian government had run out of money and stopped paying for customs agents. They still reported to work but their only means of income was, well, bribery and extortion from those entering the country. I can't blame them, really; but, it made for travel to Russia tricky (to say the least). In our previous trips, we had extra cash and goodies that we would barter for them to stamp our paperwork and enter the country. This time, we had only the allotted money for the adoption and supplies just for the trip. We were exposed; there was nothing left to give them. The other challenge was timing. We couldn't spend much time during the customs shakedown because we had a train to catch and a court date the following day for the adoption (all of this was planned – the short turnaround time and other scheduling conflicts – to make it difficult for us to do what we were called to do and adopt our daughters).

We were waiting in a long line for the custom agents. And, like in other airports around the world, a green light turns on to show which agent to go to. I had noticed a new agent had opened up his kiosk. He was young and had no one else with him. We came to the front of the line and suddenly his green light turned on. We walked over and I happened to notice the top of a silver cross that he wore around his neck (it is rare to see crosses worn by people in Russia). I had a feeling that everything was going to be okay. He read our paperwork thoroughly. He looked up at us and then read it again. He said, "You adopt, da?" We nodded. He asked in Russian which bags are ours. We touched them and then pointed at each line item on our paperwork to show him it all matched. He then said, in Russian, "You adopt two girls?" We nodded again. He looked at us, smiled and said, "Ochin horoshov" (very good). He stamped our paperwork and pointed to the exit. We left immediately and joyfully.

Who will roll away the stone? We entered into Russia with that metaphorical question – who will roll away the stone of bribery and extortion and let us pass into the country. We think this was a miracle.

Some of you may remember Richard from New York. He arrived at the beginning of our Lenten season and spoke warmly of us during the announcements on Palm Sunday. His boss, Michael, came down to Longboat to get away from the winter in the city. There was a day when Richard called and said his boss is on the way to the hospital and needs prayers. While I was driving, I prayed for him right then. Within ten minutes, his condition improved and they were able to help him along. Some would say that was the ambulance staff working on him, others, like me, would say it's a miracle. I say that because it's a miracle in itself that Richard found us. As he explained on Palm Sunday, he felt that God was calling him to attend a loving church and, in his words, "Thanks be to God, I found you." It's a miracle that Richard felt comfortable enough to call me in his moment of desperation. And, of course, it's a miracle that his boss is on the road to restored health.

As you will hear in a few moments, we have a prayer list for folks who have chronic medical conditions, those recovering from surgery, those in nursing care, those undergoing cancer treatment, and those in hospice. If you are on the list, it's either because you are a part of this congregation or someone in the congregation loves you and there is no other church praying for you. This is how it was for a man named Josh. He was doing poorly in health and was added to our chronic medical list. Shortly after adding him, he was called by his doctor and was told that they have an organ that they'd like to transplant with him. They called it a miracle that it came available to him. Today, Josh is on our recovery from surgery list and soon he will be off our prayer list all together.

What stone do you carry that you'd like God to roll away. What miracle are you seeking God to do? Where in your life are you like the women who, although they knew there was a stone blocking the entrance to the tomb, they went anyway. Where in your life are stepping out in faith believing that God will roll away whatever is in your path.

Whether it is a coincidence that I got a free breakfast sandwich on the day that someone needed it. A coincidence that we happened to get the only customs agent who would let us pass without a shakedown. A coincidence that people get healed who are prayed for by us. Whatever you decide, just know that Easter is full of miracles. It takes us, however, to step out in faith, and to ask, who will roll away the stone.