

PAST THE PASSION

An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
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At the very end of Mel Gibson's extraordinarily gory portrayal of the passion of Christ, there's a very quiet, evocative scene. First there's utter darkness. Then a few rays of light play across rock walls of what looks like the inside of a cave. A grating noise begins to grow and as the shadows retreat we realize that a great stone is being rolled away from the door of a tomb. Then we see Jesus sitting up into the foreground of the screen, stigmata and all, but very much alive. The movie ends as he stands up to walk out of the tomb.

It's finally Easter. Hallelujah! We're past the Passion. Thanks be to God. And Happy Easter to each and every one of you. The message of Easter is resurrection -- traditionally seen as immortal life after mortal death, not just for Jesus but potentially for each and every one of us. The message of Easter is also resurrection on a daily basis within our own mortal lives here on earth. That's what I want to speak about today. There's a way out of our personal tombs of pain and suffering, of cynicism and despair, if only we'll open our eyes, sit up, and see how the stone has been rolled away by a power far beyond our control.

As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not worry about your life...for...indeed your heavenly Father knows [what] you need."ⁱ We sang in our opening hymn, "Soar we now where Christ has led; Living out the words he said; Made like him, like him we rise; Ours the cross, the grave, the skies." The cycle of life and death and resurrection that Christ embodied is mirrored in

common, trustworthy cycles of the universe: The sun goes down, but the sun also rises.ⁱⁱ If winter comes, can spring be far behind?ⁱⁱⁱ Human desperation and hopelessness are real, yet they can also be transformed into human aspiration and hopefulness.

A ministerial colleague of mine, David Rankin, who served churches in Boston and San Francisco, tells a story about a prisoner he regularly visited: "Gene lived in a dingy red-brick building in the heart of the city. Enclosed by walls, with bars on the upper windows, it was more like a cave than a home. Only a teenager, he had been convicted of sale and possession of narcotics. He was also a thief and a liar. For almost a year, we met together every Thursday in a small room on the second tier of the cell block. We talked about prison, parents, children; We talked about Darwin, Newton, Einstein; We talked about life, love, hope and truth. We were never aware of the HOLY in our midst."

"During his final month of prison, Gene enrolled as a special student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After his early release, he became a full-time student in chemistry. When he graduated with honors from MIT, I was thanked by his father, by his mother, and by Gene, himself. It was pleasant to receive the accolades. But how the stone had been moved from the cave's entrance -- was impossible to tell. A resurrection is always a mystery -- though it happens every day."^{iv}

A minister in my sister's Congregational church in Minneapolis, Virginia Rickeman, has written an Easter Prayer which I love, entitled "Roll Away the Stone." Here's some of it: "God, we have such a hard time 'getting it.' Every year we listen again to the story of Easter and still we look around us, puzzled. We are still concerned: who will roll away the stone at the entrance to

the tomb?

"We see that there continue to be wars and refugees from wars ... cruelty and oppression; violence, accidents, and sickness. Who will roll away this stone... We are horrified at the ways poverty and indifference set up ever-expanding slums. We hear people cry out, with rage on their tongues and hurt in their eyes. Who will roll away the stone...

"God, we are not even clear what side of this stone we stand on. We feel its mass of pain and fear and bitterness pressing against our hearts. We feel victimized, not quite good enough, and very much alone. Are we in the clutches of death within the cold, dark confines of a rocky vault? Or are we dazedly walking in an outer world made meaningless because love and wisdom and life itself lie buried?

"...So we come this morning. We come with our questions and our hope, with despair over the faults within us and the evil around us, with deep yearning for joy and goodness and life. We come not knowing who will roll the stone away or how...

"We come to Easter, and [then we] discover [that] the stone is rolled away... We thought, somehow, that it was all going to be left up to us, and here the stone has been moved by nothing we said or did or prayed, but only through the gracious power of your love, God... It is wonderful, awful, joyous, terrifying. We stand, shocked, on the threshold which the stone once blocked. Do we dare cross? Do we run? Do we stay or go? Press forward or retreat? What is in the unknown beyond?

"And then comes your voice, familiar, tender, calling us by name, and although everything looks the same, nothing will ever be the same again. We are aware of ourselves, no longer

ourselves, but more ourselves than ever. We are dissolved, centered, transported, grounded... Nothing matters. Everything matters. And [as we roll up our sleeves to go to work again, as we press forward] all is simply one, long, glorious Alleluia. Amen."^v

In today's gospel lesson,^{vi} Mary Magdalene comes to Jesus' tomb while it is still dark on Sunday morning. According to Mark's gospel she's brought spices to anoint Jesus' body.^{vii} But she has a major question on her mind: "Who will roll away the stone...from the entrance to the tomb?"^{viii} When she arrives, though, she sees that the stone has already been rolled away. As John reports, she's confused and runs to get Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loves. None of them really understand what it means, and even think it's likely that the grave has been robbed. Mary exclaims, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."^{ix}

Jesus himself must have been confused -- or at least the human, pre-Easter, pre-Resurrection Jesus must have been confused -- for on Friday he'd said to a criminal crucified with him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Now the resurrected Jesus emerges from an earthly tomb on Sunday, with forty more days in this world before his Ascension into heaven.^x And according to the Apostles Creed, he spent those three days between his death and resurrection, not in paradise, but "descended into hell."

As Virginia Rickeman puts it, "God, we have such a hard time 'getting it.' Every year we listen again to the story of Easter and still we look around us, puzzled. [Then,] We come to Easter, and discover [that] the stone is rolled away...The stone has been moved by nothing we said or did or prayed." In the words of David Rankin, "A resurrection is always a mystery --

though it happens every day." As Jesus' says in the Garden of Gethsemene the night before he dies, "Father...not my will but yours be done."^{xi} The stone is somehow rolled away and resurrection occurs, not only two thousand years ago in Israel, but here and now every day, beyond our reach and control -- but we do need to open our eyes, sit up, take notice, and then walk forward into the new world.

I hope I'm not being heard to say that resurrection occurs and is manifest simply by sitting on our hands. Resurrection is past the passion, but you don't need to see Mel Gibson's movie to be aware of what kind of pain and suffering Jesus experienced first as a result of his active life of making peace, promoting justice, and modelling love. A consistent, weekly, year-long prison ministry of visitation preceded Gene's transformation into a successful MIT graduate. In Rickeman's prayer, deep concern about war and poverty and oppression constitutes the great stone that threatens to crush any Easter hope that we can effectively confront them. Jesus' last lesson to his disciples at the end of Matthew is that salvation requires our willingness to serve the very least of the human family when they're hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and in prison. As James insists, we must be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive"^{xii} ourselves. "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."^{xiii}

No, far from our sitting on our hands, the Easter message is to find the open door -- the resurrection opening -- and actively to walk through it. The Easter message is that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, not one completely of our making or completely under our control, but we need to walk toward the light. The Easter message is foreshadowed in today's reading from Isaiah, where the Israelite community has been oppressed and exiled in Babylonia for decades:

"Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake, as in days of old...So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."^{xiv}

Easter is the story of the stone rolled away, of the open door. It may resonate with our childhood stories of opening doors, from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland to C.S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe to Frances Hodgkin Burnett's Secret Garden.^{xv} Open doors mean opportunity, and closed doors mean disappointment. Open doors mean adventure in new, transformed worlds. Closed doors mean the end of the road. It's Easter now -- the day we celebrate being past all the pain of the passion, at least symbolically. The open door lies ahead. Resurrection is always a mystery -- though it happens every day.

NOTES

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- i. Matthew 6: 25,32; See Luke 12: 22-32.
 - ii. See Ecclesiastes 1:5.
 - iii. Percy Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," The College Survey of English Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942), p. 272.
 - iv. David O. Rankin, Portraits from the Cross (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1978), p. 17.
 - v. Virginia Rickeman, The Well is Deep (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), pp. 19-20.
 - vi. John 20: 1-9.
 - vii. Mark 16:1.
 - viii. Mark 16:3.
 - ix. John 20: 2.
 - x. See Acts 1: 1-11, especially verse 3.
 - xi. Luke 22:42; See also Mark 14:36 and Matthew 26:39.
 - xii. James 1:22.
 - xiii. James 2:17.
 - xiv. Isaiah 51: 9-11.
 - xv. As suggested by Carl Scovel in "The Open Door," an Easter sermon collected in The Unitarian Universalist Christian, Vol. 57 (2002), p. 44.