What Stones Can’t Hold

April 17, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

This morning we have two readings, and we have two rich men, surrounded by impossibility — one concerned about eternal life, one carrying a body broken by death.

Now if you are a little confused by these readings showing up today, you are not alone. At our worship planning meeting last week, I shared these selections with my colleagues and I was met with silence. One of them, and I don’t want to name names here, I would never want to put anyone on the spot, but one of them ran his hands through his white hair and said, “Well, for a sermon series about resurrection, it’s an interesting choice to leave out the resurrection.”

So since I’ve already taken us somewhat afield, I’m just going to keep going and tell you that last weekend, I had the privilege of baptizing Isaac Baker Davidson, child of the covenant. His parents and I have been friends since seminary, and for the moment of their baby’s baptism, they wanted to be parents more than they wanted to be pastors, so they flew me in for the heavy lifting. And so I lifted up all 11 pounds 12 ounces of that beautiful baby boy, splashed some water on his head, and prayed for the almighty God to descend upon him and dwell in his heart forever.

It was a picture-perfect moment, one I will treasure for a very long time to come. In fact, everything went so well that after the baptism itself, since I was not leading the rest of the service, I sat down and said to his parents, “Oh, let me hold him a little bit longer.” Isaac understood this as his cue to spit up all over himself, requiring a complete wardrobe change right there in the sanctuary.

It was much later in the day, as I sat in an airport on my way home, that I remembered having recently read these words: “The first act of the Christian life is a renunciation, a challenge. In baptism, the Christian stands naked and unashamed before [everything] — impulses and temptations, sins and failures, empty sales pitches and screwy labels — and says, ‘I am a beloved child of God, and I renounce anything or anyone who says otherwise.’”

In fact, in some Orthodox traditions, [part of the liturgy invites the newly baptized] to literally spit in the face of evil and death, making the audacious claim that neither one of those will ever get the final word.”

I texted Isaac’s parents that paragraph, and then wrote, “See? He was just making his first theological declaration.”

“Great,” they texted back. “Another theologian is just what this household needs.”

The truth is, I think we need all the theologians we can get, especially theologians willing to spit in the face of death. Because — have you noticed? — we’ve got more than enough death to go around. I think that’s why Matthew tells the story the way he does: as a renunciation; as a challenge.

Every gospel writer tells the story a little differently, with details that don’t quite match up from one account to another, but here Matthew is in a league of his own. No one else includes the back room conversations. Others mention Joseph of Arimathea placing Jesus’ body in the tomb and covering the door with a stone, but only Matthew reports the nervous chatter that follows.

The chief priests and the Pharisees, who were, remember, the ones who lobbied for Pilate to condemn Jesus to death, those chief priests and Pharisees show up in Pilate’s office again. Ironi-
cally, they quote Jesus. “Remem-
ber what he said,” they say to
Pilate. “He said after three days,
he would rise again.”

Their concern, they say, is
that his followers might steal his
body, to make it seem like his
words came true. That, they say,
would be an even bigger problem
than the problem they’d just re-
solved. “You have to secure the
tomb,” they demand. “Secure it
until the third day.”

“You have a guard of soldiers
at your disposal,” Pilate tells
them. “Go and make it as secure
as you can.” So they go, Matthew
tells us, and they make the tomb
secure by sealing the stone.

Three times Matthew uses
that word: secure — three times
in three verses, repeated and
redundant, confident and strong.
In Greek, it comes from the root
asphaleia. In its noun form, the
word is translated “security.” Just
as often, the word is translated
“certainty.” “Make the tomb
secure,” they said. “Make cer-
tain he doesn’t go anywhere.”
Asphaleia.

I wonder if there were two
reasons they were so anxious
about security. The first, of
course, was that the body might
be stolen. The other, maybe, was
an unspoken concern, “a fear that
the man whom they had crucified
really would come alive again as
he had promised, that the body
that now lay dead in its tomb,
disfigured by the mutilations of
the cross … that this body would
start to breathe again, stand up
in its grave clothes and move
toward them with unspeakable
power. To the extent that deep
within themselves the elders
feared this as a real possibility,
their being told by Pilate to make
things as secure as they could
was to have the very earth pulled
out from under them. How do
old men keep the sun from ris-
ing? How do soldiers secure the
world against miracle? Trying
to prevent this,” one theologian
says, “was like trying to stop the
wind with a machine gun.”

A seal, a stone and soldiers,
and still they were not able to
hold him.

I suppose that is why I read
the story of the secure tomb,
rather than the story of the empty
tomb, this morning. Because
resurrection makes more of a dif-
ference in my life the more I un-
derstand just how strong it really
is, when I see more clearly what
it is capable of breaking through.
And in my own life, I have seen
how even the strongest security
cannot keep what it seeks to
protect safe. As the chief
priests and the Pharisees gather
up all of their tightest security, all
of their strongest certainty, all of
their asphaleia, and resurrection
still happens.

Despite every odd and de-
spite their every effort, the stone
is rolled back, and Jesus is not
there.

Thanks be to God for that.

Now here is my confession:
Sometimes it is easier for me to
believe that resurrection happens
after we die than it is for me to
believe that resurrection also
happens while we are alive. You
see, it’s not hard for me to imag-
ine that once we are freed from
the bounds and labors and hard-
ships of this world, we will see
Jesus face to face, and we will
be transformed. It is sometimes
a little harder for me to believe
that we will be transformed in
this life, too, mainly because the
world, well, so much of it still
looks un-transformed.

Luckily, I have very good
teachers, including many of you,
who don’t let me forget what
resurrection can look like.

I shared this story with a few
of you on Easter Sunday: In one
of my previous churches, I knew
a man who grew up in a home
with alcoholism and abuse. He
made it through his childhood
and worked as hard as he could
to build a different sort of life.

He intended to leave the past
in the past. He married a kind
woman. He raised his children
well. He never drank any alco-
hol, not once. He erred on the
side of gentleness and meekness
and never raised a hand against
another soul and never told
another soul about all that had
happened to him.

As his own children grew
and left home, and as his parents
grew old and died, he lived with
his secrets and his shame quar-
tained, absolutely certain that if he
let them out, the sickness would
infect everyone he loved.

Finally, in his mid-60s, he
realized he was so very tired. He
walked into an Al-Anon meet-
ing. “My name is Carter,” he
said, “and I am the child of an
alcoholic.”

“Hi, Carter,” they said back
to him, and in that moment, he
found the courage, in fits and
starts, to tell them everything. He
told it all, and the world didn’t
end. In fact, if you ask him, he
will tell you that night is when
his life finally began. That is the
night when the stone was rolled
away, and he broke out of the tomb.

And I have shared this story before too: the story of a grieving widow, unable to imagine living one more day without her beloved husband. She attended grief group, yet for weeks never shared a word. Silently, tears would run down her face, and later in the day, I would receive an email. “I’m sorry,” she would write, “it’s just too hard to talk about him.”

This went on for several weeks, until the last group gathering. That afternoon, she walked in with photos and papers and just enough courage. “I would like to tell you about my Robert,” she said. And with those words, the stone was rolled away, and she broke out of the tomb.

And there are other stories I could tell, including the story of my parents, from whom I have learned more about resurrection than anyone else this past year. Last year they closed the family business, sold the house I grew up in, put most of their belongings in storage and moved to a tiny cabin in northern Michigan — not because they wanted to, but because Detroit’s a hard place to run a small business these days, and this is what the bank told them to do.

I worried about them every day. I asphaleia-ed myself to no end, utterly convinced they were headed for further chaos around every corner. And around every corner, they have proven me wrong. They’ve made new friends up there in the frozen tundra. My mother has found a part-time job working at the grocery store that gives them a little extra cash and gives her a lot of good stories to tell when she comes home each day. My dad goes on long walks with the dog, finding more energy than he’s had in years. The stone has been rolled away; they have broken out of the tomb, and slowly but surely, they are dragging me with them.

And if all of this sounds too good to be true … too convenient or too tidy … remember the story of the rich young man that Michelle read for us. In the midst of a series of teachings, this young man asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. It is a story we often use to talk about material possessions and wealth and what it means to follow Jesus.

Those are good conversations, important conversations. Today, though, I am grateful for this text for another reason. You see, after the young man asks Jesus about eternal life, Jesus instructs him to keep the commandments. The man says, “I do all those things; what am I still missing?”

Jesus says, “If you want to be perfect, sell your possessions, give your money to the poor, and then come and follow me.” The man goes away grieved, and this is the last we hear of him. Jesus isn’t finished, however. He says to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

I think that may be one of the most tortured lines in the Bible, that line about a poor camel getting shoved through the eye of a needle. We’ve found all sorts of ways to explain it in our attempts to tame it. Even the earliest Christians joined in. One of the apocryphal gospels tells the story of a needle’s eye that miraculously grows large enough to allow something as large as this camel to pass through.

There’s a legend that won’t die about a gate in Jerusalem named the Needle’s Eye; that would mean, of course, that Jesus is really talking about an entryway into the city, not an actual, physical needle. It’s a good story; it would be even better if it were true. Then there’s the argument that it’s an ancient typo, that the word for camel is really close to the word for rope, and while that wouldn’t be easy, it certainly would be easier.

But while we are busy explaining and rationalizing, the disciples are busy panicking. “Well, if that’s true,” they say, “then who can be saved?”

Jesus looks at them and says, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Those are words that roll away the stone, and break us out of the tomb.

Those are the words of defiance and challenge, that spit straight in the face of evil and death and do not back down. Those are the words that remind us that resurrection is God’s work, not ours. We are merely the recipients asked to tell the story when it comes our way, asked to let ourselves be changed by it.

John Updike wrote these words about Easter long ago, but they still ring true today:
Make no mistake; if he rose at all
it was as his body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.
It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as his Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as his flesh: ours.
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages;
let us walk through the door.
The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day.
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed by the miracle, and crushed by [our own resistance].
Friends, the stone has been rolled away. “Let us walk through the door” and live like it.

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3Excerpt from John Updike’s “Seven Stanzas at Easter”

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html.