



What Stones Can't Hold

TEXT
Matthew 19:16–26;
27:57–66

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 beau-

tiful 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."¹

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. “Remember 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 resolved. “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 certain 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 rising? 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.”²

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 difference in my life the more I understand just how strong it really is, when I see more clearly what it is capable of breaking through. And Matthew makes it clearer than anyone else that 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 despite 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 imagine that once we are freed from the bounds and labors and hardships 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 alcohol, 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 quarantined, 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 meeting. “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 re-
kindle,
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, tran-
scendence;
making of the event a par-
able, 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 material-
ity 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 un-
thinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by [our own
resistance].³*

Friends, the stone has been rolled away. "Let us walk through the door" and live like it.

¹Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), pages 18 and 21.

²Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pages 66–67.

³Excerpt from John Updike's "Seven Stanzas at Easter"



This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

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