

And the stone, with all its weight, was rolled away

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 28:1-10

Eric Marinus Nelson v First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC v Easter 2008

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So here we are at Easter. It looks more like Christmas, but the equinox tells us it's springtime, and our calendars say it's Easter. So it is. Easter: The day for bonnets and lilies and choruses of Hallelujah. The day to proclaim resurrection. Actually every day is a day to proclaim resurrection, I suppose. But Easter is that special day. And it *is* joyous. We sing these hymns with all our hearts, our spirits leap when we see beaming children run down the aisle with tulips and hyacinths in their hands, the black crepe of mourning is pulled down and color flows into the room on rivers of sunlight. We all dearly want to go home happy, and I sincerely hope you do. Happy, or at least hopeful, with a bounce in your step and a song that you find yourself humming without even realizing you were doing it.

But I'm troubled. I apologize, but I have to admit it: I come into this day troubled and discouraged. Sometimes I feel as dry as a bone in Ezekiel's valley.

I've got my own personal reasons, and I'm sure you have yours, too. Reasons that we might not really want to talk about, not right now. Maybe we're tired of dealing with them and just want a break. Maybe we don't want to be a burden. Those things don't go away on Easter, though they might take a back seat for a while. Maybe there's something here in Easter to help us deal with them, something in this service, among these ribbons, this light, this fragrance of flowers. But troubles have a way of bobbing back to the surface like an unweighted corpse, and that's not the kind of rising of the dead that we want to think about today.

Still, at some point we need to let these things resurface so we can introduce them and Easter to each other or there will always be a disconnect within us—Easter in the happy place of sunshine and our sorrows in the shadow places they draw us down to again when the song slips away and we go back to life as we knew it yesterday.

I don't want to be a downer today. I want to hold on to Easter—I really do—but I know that this day will mean more to me, and I hope to you, if it's more nourishing than the sugar buzz the kids will get on all that chocolate. You know those little peeps—yellow, pink, and purple, marshmallowy white inside? Sugar refined of all nutrients? We don't want Easter to be only that.

So when we roll away the stone on our own dark places, open our anxiety closets, lift the lid on the Pandora's box we've hidden away, what do we find? You've got your own keepsakes of care. Mine include persistent sorrow over a member of my family; concern for my stepmother, whose own mother died recently; the low-grade fever of worry that

parents always bear, even in the best of times; grief (usually latent, sometimes not) over each of my parents, both dead for years now. Some of you are also among those I carry in my heart today.

But much of the concern I carry like a stone goes far beyond church and family.

I'm still angry over the Iraq war. It's been five years since we invaded that country—the first time in our history that we ever started a war unprovoked. And for the good of ridding them of Saddam's tyranny, I deeply believe we as a nation have a lot of repentance to do for all the sorrow and destruction we've unleashed upon and among the Iraqi people—repentance that we're not even close to being ready for because we're unwilling or unable to face up to our own faults, unwilling and unable because we're so defensively determined to find others' faults before confessing our own, so obsessed with comparing our righteousness to the failings of others, so driven to always come out first in every comparison. Yes, I am troubled today.

I worry about the ignorance that divides us from our Muslim neighbors. One recent poll shows that when non-Muslim Americans were asked what they most admire about Islam, the most frequent response was “Nothing.” The second-most frequent was “I don't know.” Combined, more than half couldn't think of anything positive to say about the second-largest religion in the world, and the third- if not second-largest among our own people. Responses to another question revealed that a quarter of Americans wouldn't want a Muslim for a neighbor. Our prejudice is appalling.

Barack Obama gave a somber and at times very personal speech this week in Philadelphia. It too was about prejudice. Not wholly, not even primarily, but in substantial part. It was about the rush to judgment by loud voices in the media concerning his pastor of 20 years. It was about our nation's original sin of racism. It was about anger in both the black and the white communities. But especially in the black community. Black anger is something that we in the racial majority simply don't understand because by and large we are still snowblind to its causes. To say that there's anger in both communities is not to say they're comparable. They're not, and until we come to see that and do a great deal of work built on that foundation, there will be no deep and lasting racial reconciliation in this land.

Race is perhaps the most problematic area in which we confuse the ideal with the actual, because those of us who were born white get to live in the ideal world—racially—in a way that those born black or brown or red don't. And since we get to live in a world where nobody ever called us a racial slur that carries the acidic weight of a history of bigotry, and no cop ever pulled us over for Driving While Black, and government policies and banking practices never denied us or our parents or grandparents a housing loan because of our race, setting us behind by a generation or three in having any wealth to pass along to our children—because of all this and a myriad other reasons we're blind to, we really do believe not only that all people are created equal but that we all get to live that way, by and large. But we don't all get to live that way. How long can this go on?

I want to quote back to you the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And while my heart rises in response to those words, I also know that we have a long road ahead of us, and the hope that Martin Luther King or Jeremiah Wright appeals to in the black community comes from a deeper place than the hope of those of us who have never been pressed down so hard by the weight of history. And I am troubled that we don't see the difference.

Much of my life is lived in the moments in this morning's Easter drama between when they lay Christ in the tomb and when they see the tomb is empty. To borrow the chronology of Easter week, most of my life is lived in the long Saturday between Good Friday and Easter morning. Most of my life—most of all our lives, I'd guess—is being lived yesterday, in Holy Saturday.

Maybe the whole chronology of Easter weekend is as figurative as God's six-day workweek in the Book of Genesis. Some say that what's described as a day or two between Jesus' death and the dawning of Easter morning in the lives of the women and men who loved and followed him was not a mere weekend in Jerusalem but an indeterminate time—days, weeks, months, who knows—of sorting through the discouragements and joys of their lives in light of what they had experienced in his presence. I believe that, too. Holy Saturday is where we live.

But Easter is what we live toward.

I'm not here to offer any endorsement one way or other regarding Mr. Obama's candidacy, but the key to what he said the other day—and it *was* an Easter message—is that we are not irrevocably tied to a tragic past. Yesterday cannot be the only place in which we live. The weight of a painful past bears heavy upon us, but stones have been known to have been rolled away.

They don't just budge on their own. The dead weight of personal sorrow, the stony burden of amassed wrongs, the weight of history—none of it shifts easily. We may not expect it to lift at all. But sometimes we look back and see that the stone has been moved, maybe it's even been rolled away.

Matthew knows both this experience among his people, and he knows this experience is itself a wonder. He says it took an earthquake. And an angel, “his appearance like lightning, his clothes white as snow.”

The gospels are sermons, long extended proclamations about the extraordinary power of God at work in the world expressed through stories of miracles: healing the sick, raising the dead. What's factually true and what's an imaginative expression of ineffable wonder? Does it really matter? Mark, Luke, John—none of them speaks of an earthquake. Nor do they all speak of the presence of an angel. If there were factual memory at work here, you'd think everybody would remember details like those! What

the gospel writers are all telling, each in their own way, is of an extraordinary dawning of awareness, at least a figurative returning to the tomb after a long sabbath away and, returning, seeing that the stone that had buried their hopes had shifted. The power they had known in the presence of Christ was no longer sealed away, but free and on the loose. The key thing that Jesus says through the story today is, “I am going ahead of you.”

Holy Saturday may be where we live most of our lives, but Easter is what we live toward. Yesterday gives today its substance, and tomorrow gives today its hope.

Maybe it's a good thing that it's snowing today. Matthew says the angel's robes were white as snow, but the stuff drifting down from the sky this morning probably puts us more in mind of Christmas. Three months ago on a snowy silent night we sang different hymns of joy, reminding ourselves that God is with us, Emmanuel. Easter should remind us of Christmas, and it should also transcend it. The women and men who knew Jesus knew the presence of God in him. But maybe that experience was so strong that while they were in his presence, they couldn't even conceive of the larger message he kept trying to teach them. God's presence and power in the world was not limited to the body and person of Jesus of Nazareth. But when they laid Jesus' broken body in the tomb, they probably thought they'd witnessed the death of God's presence and power as well.

And then came Saturday. Holy, silent Saturday. Days of discouragement and sorrow, of adjustment and forgetfulness and reflection. And looking back, they saw the tomb was unsealed. An earthquake of revelation. An epiphany of such life-altering awareness it was like lightning. After living in the sabbath of Holy Saturday—which surely lasted different lengths for different people—they found that God's power and presence in the world had not been sealed away after all.

We, like they, are not forever condemned to live in a yesterday of sorrows and discouragement. The power and presence of God is not limited to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' body is gone, but what we call the body of Christ lives on in every age, in communities of love and justice, of shalom and salaam, unlimited by time and place. Christ is with us today, challenging us, reminding us, encouraging and strengthening us. Christ goes before us, calling us into tomorrow, and he waits for us in the home country we left once upon a time so long ago to join him on this amazing journey.

Ours is a journey that has not seen its end yet.

Thanks be to God.