

**The Great Stone, Moved.** An Easter sermon in response to Isaiah 25:6-9 and Mark 16:1-8 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, March 31, 2024 (B Easter).

A little boy was out with his mom shopping for their annual Easter celebration: candy, eggs, baskets, that fake grass ... when they happened to run into their pastor, there in the store. The pastor looked at the boy and said, “Hey Billy, what are you up to today?” ... Billy was excited about all the stuff they were buying, so he said, “We’re getting ready for Easter, Pastor!” +++ Always looking for a chance to reinforce what the kids were learning in Sunday School, the Pastor replied, “Well, that’s great, Billy. Can you tell me what Easter is all about?” ... “Sure – that’s easy. Jesus went to Jerusalem. Then he rode on a donkey and people waved palm branches at him.” ... “Okay, that’s a good start. Do you know what else happened?” ... “Yeah – Jesus started arguing with people and so they beat him up and crucified him, and he died.” ... “But that’s not the *end* of the story – what else happened?” ... “They put him in a tomb and put a big huge stone in front of the door. But three days later, Jesus came back to life and the big stone got rolled back.” ... The pastor was very pleased, “Good job, Billy, you know the whole story.” ... “But wait, I didn’t say the most important part yet – when Jesus steps out, he looks around – and if he sees his shadow there’s six more weeks of winter...”

I came across that joke on the internet once when I was looking for something else... It’s bad, I know... But, I think the innocent humor does break the tension of Easter a little – a tension that hides in plain sight as we show up in our Springtime finest – with beautiful flowers and majestic music and we relive the Easter Story. +++ As we accept the perfect gift that is given to us today and everyday... As we gratefully receive the perfect ... **GRACE** of the Risen Christ. +++ +++ Underneath all that – is the fact that we *know* – we *feel* deep in our bones – just how much we desperately *need* it. – Deep-down we know that no matter how good our intentions are on Sunday mornings, here together in prayer and worship, – confessing our sins, – recommitting ourselves to living in the example of Christ, – somehow or another it seems like things start going downhill as soon as we leave the parking lot, – sometimes before we even get through those doors. It’s in our nature... and... it always has been.

By the time we get to this morning’s **Old** Testament reading, Isaiah has given very little reason to be optimistic about where we are heading as the people of God. Since the moment of creation, God’s people have broken promise after promise – law after law – and fallen further and further from the unity and peace that the Lord intended for us. +++ God’s *own people* have trampled creation and turned their backs on their Creator – have betrayed one another – and are becoming lost in their sins... In the chapter just before our reading begins, Isaiah laments with these desperate words: “The earth lies *polluted* under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant... +++ I pine away, I pine away. Woe is me! For the *treacherous* deal **treacherously**, the treacherous deal **very** treacherously... +++ The earth is utterly broken..., the earth is torn asunder..., the earth is violently shaken...The earth[’s] *transgression* lies heavy upon it, +++ and it falls, +++ and will not rise again.” +++ **Left to ourselves**, all these failings and suffering can lead only to death. +++ +++ There is a sense of finality to this failure – to this judgment. And, as the chapter concludes, we are disheartened to learn that the only glimmer of hope – the only hope for the earth and all its people – lies in the very God whose judgment we are suffering – the God who seems to have abandoned us to reap the fruit of our sins. +++ **It’s like a Great Stone is lodged between this world and our only hope for redemption – a stone too large and heavy for us to move for ourselves.**

+++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++

This fallen world Isaiah writes about sounds all too familiar to **us**, doesn’t it? The unity and peace **we** were raised to believe is **our** birthright in **this** land... seems to have slipped through our fingers like sand as we’ve broken ourselves into factions and argue over even the smallest things ... While hope – in a shared concern for the common good seems to be almost a quaint, naive, idea... And the gulf between those with secure, dry, warm homes and food – and those without – grows ever wider. +++ Now, I’m not suggesting this is just in our own nation. Far from it... Worldwide, we *continue* to see a breakdown of collective values – common goals – and generosity ... +++ The prophet’s judgment that “the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants” could easily be directed at our 21<sup>st</sup> century mass extinctions, global warming, and poisoned oceans. +++ Young people are rising up all over – voicing their despair over violence and too-young confrontations with death. +++ +++ And, I think,

over time we get worn down. – It gets harder and harder for us to see **past** all this barrenness – hard to believe in a morning light that's waiting... beyond our present darkness. +++ We give up and let despair take us – then become haunted by the fear of death and come to believe that – ultimately – death will have the last word. +++ Disconnected from God and from each other – our despair *itself* drives us – until each of us, too, have rolled our **own Great Stone** between ourselves and any... *reasonable*... hope for redemption – a stone too large and heavy for *us* to ever move for *ourselves*.

+++++ ++++++ ++++++ ++++++

I think Mary Magdalene and her companions, as we find them in our gospel reading that Sunday morning long ago, can understand those feelings of despair – those feelings of hopelessness. Just days before, they saw it with their own eyes when Jesus' battered and lifeless body was laid in a tomb hewn from solid rock. They watched helplessly as a *literal* Great Stone was rolled against the doorway. +++ They didn't even have a chance to properly prepare the body for burial. +++ So *now*, in the early morning hours after the Sabbath passed, they are bringing spices to anoint Jesus in death. – It will be **a final goodbye, they believe, to the one they had thought would be with them forever.** +++ They fully expect Jesus to still lay just where they saw him last. +++ And so, just before arriving – they realize +++ – the *Great Stone* – it lies between them and their fallen Lord. +++ After everything they've been through, there is still an impossible barrier blocking them from Christ. – A barrier that's too large and heavy for them to ever move for themselves. It's a hopeless moment – a moment of despair. +++ But when they stop worrying, – when they stop talking – and look up – they see that the Great Stone separating them from the Lord had already been rolled back for them! They didn't have to move the Stone themselves – they didn't have to go find someone to do it for them – they didn't have to stand there waiting, hoping that someone would come by. +++ All they had to do was approach the tomb; – just come looking for Christ – +++ That large and heavy barrier... +++ That insurmountable obstacle – +++ that source of despair and isolation – was caste aside FOR them by the power of God Almighty. +++ Then the angel tells them that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised. He has already left the tomb – gone ahead to Galilee. +++ What a change of fate for these faithful women – against all odds – beyond any *reasonable* hope – these women who came to mourn and rub a corpse with spices, end up, instead, being the *first* ones to proclaim the resurrection of our Lord and Savior.

+++++ ++++++ ++++++ ++++++

Revisiting the prophet Isaiah – what does **he** promise in today's reading after lamenting that the world's transgressions can lead only to death – with our only hope lying in the mercy of the very God who seems to have left us to our sins? +++ In a change of fate as swift and unexpected as the Great Stone, Moved – the prophet tells us the Lord will be *generous* with that mercy – will surprise **ALL** people with “a feast of rich **food**, a feast of well-aged wines!” +++ As for **the power of death** and despair? The Lord will **DESTROY** the shroud that is cast over ALL peoples, the sheet that is spread over **ALL** nations; he will swallow up **death** forever.” +++ Not just the shroud of death over Israel – or God's favored people. +++ The Lord will deliver ALL PEOPLE from their sins – redeem ALL PEOPLE from isolation – invite ALL PEOPLE to eternal life. +++ +++ The Prophets and the Gospels ALL speak of this ETERNAL PROMISE: when we least expect it – and when we least deserve it +++ hope will rise from despair!! – redemption will overcome sin!! – and life in Christ will overcome death!! – >>> Forever.

+++++ ++++++ PAUSE ++++++ PAUSE ++++++

This morning – I wonder what Great Stones you might have wedged between yourself and the freedom Christ offers this Easter morning, and everyday... Great Stones that keep you from seeing the Holy Spirit at work in your life – bringing you to redemption – preparing you for paradise. Fear? ... Reluctance? ... Perhaps a sense of unworthiness? ... Something you've done that you can't put behind you, so you think the Lord can't get past it either? ... +++ **Look up!** +++ Like Mary Magdalene and her companions – approaching the tomb of Christ, just *knowing they'll* never be able to get in – just *knowing* the Great Stone forever divides them from their Lord. +++ Get your eyes off the ground... **and look up!** +++ **SEE** – my friend – this Easter Morning. – SEE... that **YOUR** Great Stone has already been rolled back by the redeeming power of God Almighty. +++ *Your* suffering – *your* doubt – *your* guilt – **whatever** it is – is transformed with your Risen Savior – transformed – into the eternal promise of salvation.

+++++ ++++++ ++++++ ++++++

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.