

Sermon for Easter C
Good Shepherd, Wareham
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The body of Jesus was laid in a tomb that had been carved out of rock. A stone was rolled over the entrance of the tomb. A large stone. A heavy stone. A stone to keep animal scavengers out. A stone to keep the smell in. A stone to keep away any who might wish to mar or steal the body.

One cubic foot of granite weighs 168 pounds. I can't lift it up. A stone large enough to cover a tomb entrance would weigh as much as a medium-sized car. Stones would be rolled in place using levers and very strong men.

The Gospel of Luke says that the women from Galilee saw where Jesus was laid on Friday, then went home and prepared spices and embalming ointments for his body. But night had fallen by the time they were done and it was the Sabbath, so they had to wait until the next possible moment, which would be Sunday early morning. So they went then. I don't know what they were thinking, though. What about the stone? Were they thinking that the men disciples would also be there that early, to roll away the stone? The men were probably sleeping off a hangover, or something. They weren't there.

But the stone was rolled away. They went in to the tomb. No body. They were puzzled. Did the disciples move the body? Suddenly, there were two men there, bright white. The women are frightened. The men ask, "Why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive? (NLT) He isn't here! He has risen from the dead! Don't you remember what he told you—he would be crucified and rise again on the third day?" Then the light bulb went off—oh! that's what he meant! They go back to tell the eleven, who thought the women were babbling idiots and dismissed them. But Peter—gotta give him credit, there—Peter went and checked out their story, and saw that the facts were there.

If you continue to read the Gospel, you see that the story continues. By the end of the day, Jesus has appeared alive to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then later to all the disciples in Jerusalem. But the first sign is the stone, rolled away, and the empty tomb.

We all have our stones. Heavy, impenetrable stones. Things in our lives that are stuck, impossible, refusing to budge. A stuck relationship. A chronic illness. The inability to hold a job. Financial crisis. Or we have stones that cover over tombs, holding stinking death inside. A wounded, angry heart. Despair over a family situation. Terrible fear of the future. A memory too awful to face. We cannot move or change these granite weights. Our lives are dragged down by them, but we are powerless against their mass.

The power of the resurrection is first manifest in the moving of that tomb stone. God's hand tapped it and nimbly rolled out of the way. And the dead body within was transformed into a living body, full of light and grace. "He isn't here in the tomb—he has risen from the dead!—Don't you remember what he told you?"

Jesus promised us life and renewal. "I am living water. I am the bread of life. I am the way and the truth and the life." All he requires of us is our stones. The stuck places, the stinking places, the places of death and impossibility in our lives.

Hannah Hurnard ([Hinds' Feet on High Places](#), Tyndale House, 1975) was brought up in an evangelical Christian household. She attended worship regularly and was expected to give her life over to Jesus at an early age. She claimed a conversion at age 11, but did not feel it. She dreaded going to worship; Sunday was "a nightmare." She found the Bible "the dullest and most lifeless book in the world." She prayed, but felt no answer. By her teen years, she gave up on God.

This, of course, was aided by the fact that she was a miserable person. She had, she said, "two hateful and tormenting handicaps. One, a horrible stammer" which kept her from going out in public alone, for fear of having to speak, and the other, "even worse than the stammer. I was obsessed by tormenting fears, some quite ordinary ones such as many other people share, but also many abnormal ones . . . I felt terror of the dark, terror of heights, a maddening terror of being shut in anywhere, terror of crowds, of being ill and of fainting and losing conscious, and above all, a daily and nightly experienced horror of death." (p. 289) She longed for the courage to commit suicide, such were the stones that she carried.

When she was 19, her father asked her to come with him to a religious convention in Keswick, a vacation spot in England. Hannah was appalled at the idea of spending all day long in a revival tent, but she struck a deal with her father. If she would go to one meeting in the morning and one at night, the rest of the time she would be free to hike the hills by herself. So she went through a week of meetings and still God seemed remote and unreal.

At the end of the time, on Saturday, the great missionary meeting took place. "Twelve men and women got up, one after another, and with radiant faces told . . . of God's transforming power which they themselves had actually seen operating in countless heathen lives." (p. 291) Hannah says that as she sat there in "utter wretchedness and looked at their radiant faces, and heard the certainty of their voices, my heart said despairingly, 'It must be true. There must be a God after all who is able to save and transform even the most wretched and tormented; able and willing, apparently, to save everybody but me. Why can't I find him?'" When the chairman asked if any parents were willing to give their children to the mission field, should God call them, and her father stood up with other parents, Hannah couldn't bear it. She fled back to her room and fell on her knees beside her bed. She was in agony.

"O God, if there is a God anywhere, you must make yourself real to me. If you exist and are really what these people describe you to be, you can't leave me like this.'" Then she grabbed her Bible and said, "O God, if there is a God, your followers say that you speak to them through the Bible. If you are real, speak to me through this book also.'" She opened the book. "It had opened at a chapter in 1 Kings . . . where Elijah challenged the Israelites to believe in the one true God, and declared that he would prove that he existed. . . the verse read, 'How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him.' The thought came to me vividly and clearly . . . 'What this unknown God is going to demand before he makes himself real is that I yield to him my stammering tongue, and agree to be his witness and messenger.' (A)t last there came a moment when I cried out again, 'O God, if there is a God, if you will make yourself real to me, I will yield my stammering mouth.'"

Hannah gave up her stone. And she was transformed. She said she still was fearful and she still stammered, but "in some miraculous and mysterious way I had been lifted into a completely new mental and spiritual environment, out of the borderland of outer darkness, into the light and glory of heaven." She went on to enroll in Bible College, to confront her fears, to allow God to heal her stammer, and to become an evangelist and writer.

But only after she yielded her stone, and allowed God's power to transform her.

What are the stones that you carry? Aren't they heavy to drag around? Wouldn't you like them to be rolled away, so that God's light and transforming power can lift them from you?

If he rolled away the stone and brought Jesus back from the dead, what can't he do for you? Amen.