**SERMON FOR EASTER SUNRISE SERVICE "Roll Away the Stone"**

(Mark 16:1-8 Preached at MPC on Sunday April 1, 2018 at 6:30 am.)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Come on, you all know the joyful answer: “The Lord is risen, indeed.” Alleluia! Today, we dress in our best springtime outfits and there are no notes of sadness, worry, grief, or fear in our greetings to one another this morning—But how different it was early on that first Easter morning as Mark tells us in our gospel. The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, didn’t greet one another with such great joy. There were no alleluias, no notes of joy in their hushed whispers. They were grieving and devastated. They had seen their beloved Jesus, their teacher, stripped of not only his clothes, but every possible shred of human dignity, murdered in the most horrible way possible, and laid in the garden tomb. Sundown and the Sabbath approached quickly; the shops were all closed and so they could not even purchase the proper spices to anoint and honor his body and, in some small way, return to him the dignity that had been so cruelly taken away.

Their biggest worry this morning was the heavy stone they had seen placed at the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. Who would move it away for them, so they could perform the duties of love and honor for their teacher, their friend, their Lord? They had no idea of the news that awaited them. They had seen Jesus die, hadn’t they? Dead people stay that way, right?

So, they gathered quietly, with their heads down, speaking their few words in hushed whispers. The women knew that all the followers of Jesus were now in grave danger, but Love called them to risk their very lives. The disciples and Peter, especially Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus — they had all run away and were now in hiding hadn’t yet heard that call.

When the women arrived at the tomb, can you imagine their surprise to see the heavy stone already rolled away and a handsome young man in a white robe sitting there as if waiting just for this moment, just for them? Who was he? Where did he come from? The questions evaporated in their amazement at his words. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, (see for yourselves) there is the place where they laid him?

Today’s story ends with the three women in complete shock, amazed and terrified, resolving to say nothing to anyone. Mark is the only one of the four canonical Gospels that contains no resurrection appearance (or does it — who was that young man in the white robe anyway?) Many scholars believe that Mark’s actual gospel ends right here at verse 8, and that both the shorter ending and longer ending we find in our modern Bibles were added soon after the original copies of Mark’s gospel began to be circulated by Christians who already knew about the Resurrection and felt the story needed rounding out.

Now, obviously, the women did finally tell someone. They must have, or we wouldn’t be here to celebrate and worship the Risen Christ this morning. No, they couldn’t keep quiet — their entire lives had been radically changed in an instant with the words “He has been raised; he is not here.”

How has your life been radically changed by that Good News — that Jesus is risen, that his dead body no longer lies behind a large heavy stone in front of a garden tomb? Or, is the heavy stone still in place for you, separating you from the Risen Lord? Are you still afraid, like the three women, to proclaim the Good News that Jesus is risen? What would that stone look like if it were still firmly in place keeping you from seeing Jesus, really knowing “he is not here” (in the grave) and living the rest of your life with that knowledge deep in your heart?

How about the stone of unbelief? There are lots of very smart people on the backside of that stone. There’s even a group of scholars; people with more degrees that you or I will acquire in a lifetime, who teach in universities and even seminaries. They call themselves the “Jesus Seminar.” They write a lot of books. I had to read a few of them — our teachers wanted us to know what we were up against. They say that the resurrection of our Lord is a lovely story that was circulated among the early Christians to give people hope and comfort, but it really didn’t happen. They say there’s no proof. They speak of the “pre-Easter Jesus” and the “post-Easter Jesus.” Now, how’s that for confusing?

But there is proof — there is eyewitness evidence that would stand up in any court of law. St. Peter (yes, that’s the same Peter who denied knowing Jesus three times and ran away to hide) declares boldly that he is an eyewitness not only to all Jesus did in Judea and Jerusalem, but that “God raised him from the dead on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him AFTER he rose from the dead . . . that everyone (including YOU) who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Paul speaks of more than 500 who were also eyewitnesses and he speaks of his own encounter with the risen Lord and says:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). These eyewitnesses beg you: Believe, beloved, and receive God’s gift of eternal life. Let Jesus roll the stone of unbelief away.

How about the stone of ignorance? Have you committed yourself to the faithful reading and study of God’s Word every single day? Do you ask God in prayer each morning what he would have you do with what you have learned from his Word? Begin each day with the study of God’s Word; participate in a Bible study, maybe even take a course online or one of our community colleges— there are courses offered there in religious studies. Allow Jesus to roll the stone of ignorance away.

There is also the stone of blindness — how blind are you to the needs of the people all around you right here in Mililani, Wahiawa, Waianae and Waikiki! Even if you aren’t sure what you can do to help, at the very least you can pray and when you do that because you have noticed — because you are no longer blind, God will show you ways of more concrete help. Do you know about the things going on in our world that are not talked about on CNN or MSNBC—Rounding out the top 10 countries that persecute Christians are: North Korea and Afghanistan are no. 1 and 2, then Somalia (No. 3), Sudan (No. 4), Pakistan (No. 5), Eritrea (No. 6), Libya (No. 7), Iraq (No. 8), Yemen (No. 9), and Iran (No. 10). We cannot fix all the awful things that are wrong with our world — it’s a sinful and broken place, yet redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, let him roll the stone of blindness away.

Finally, there is the stone of familiarity. We know the Easter story so well — we hear it every year and today we dress up, later the kids will hunt for the colorful eggs we have hidden for them, we enjoy the glorious music and admire the pretty flowers at the Altar. We celebrate the happy ending. Do we know it all so well that it no longer makes a difference in our lives? Do we remember that the happy ending is really just the beginning? Do we remember how we got here? On Maundy Thursday, did you stop to consider what Jesus’ institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion means in your life? On Good Friday, did you walk the Way of the Cross with him either here in church or in your private prayer? Did you feel a sense of loss and darkness on Holy Saturday because Christ lay in the tomb behind a heavy stone?

If you are thinking, let’s lose all the depressing images — then look to see if the heavy stone still lies between you and the amazing miracle we celebrate this day. But, if those thoughts and feelings sound very recently familiar to you, then the stone has been rolled away — “he is not here, he has been raised. See the place where they laid him.” Then you can say with the Psalmist “The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” Jesus Christ has opened for us the gates of righteousness; let us enter and offer thanks to the Lord. “On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.