

TEXT: Mark 16:1-8  
THEME: He has been raised  
SUBJECT: Easter  
TITLE: Along the Way

Easter  
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Messiah Moravian  
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If all possible objections must be overcome before we take the first step, nothing will ever be attempted. If all obstacles must be removed before we act, nothing will ever be accomplished. The women went to the tomb not knowing *how* the stone, which was very large, would be rolled away. They went anyway.

The poet, Bonnie Thurston, imagines the women's experience:

The Myrrhbearers came  
(with fear and trembling?)  
trudging along in darkness  
worrying about  
the stone.

Everybody worries about  
the stone,  
that great impediment  
between us  
and what we seek,

that great burden  
we carry  
like Sisyphus  
laboring  
up and down the hill.

The gods condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of the mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. In Camus' retelling of the myth, this futility forces us to face the only serious question: judging whether life is or is not worth living.

John Updike called the stone the "vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day." If death is the end, the end of our creativity, the end of our love and of our loves, the end of us, if in the end we are crushed by the vast rock of materiality, "What is it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live?"

The sun rose.  
The women looked up.

The stone,  
which was very large,  
had been removed.

Somebody should tell Sisyphus:  
“Put it down, man,  
And dance on it.”

The difference between dancing on the stone and eating, drinking, and being merry for tomorrow we die is faith. For the hardened materialist, the “opiate of unbelief” (Czeslaw Milosz) is an emotional sedative offering a refuge from so many elaborate perplexities, so many arduous spiritual exertions, so many trying intellectual and moral problems, so many exhausting expressions of hope and fear, charity or remorse.

David Bentley Hart sharpens the point: “Popular atheism is not a philosophy but a therapy. In this sense, it should be classified as one of those religions of consolation whose purpose is not to engage the mind or will with the mysteries of being but merely to provide a palliative for existential grievance and private disappointments.”

Hart drives the point home: “To proclaim triumphantly that there is no God, no eternal gaze that beholds our cruelties and betrayals, no final beatitude for the soul after death, may seem bold and admirable to a comfortable bourgeois academic who rarely if ever has to descend into the misery of those whose lives are at best a state of constant anxiety or at worst the indelible memory of the death of a child.

“If there is no God, then the universe (astonishing accident that it is) is a brute event of boundless magnificence and abysmal anguish, which only illusion and myth have the power to make tolerable. Moreover, if there is no God, truth is not an ultimate good—there is no such thing as an ultimate good—and the more merciful course might well be not to preach unbelief but to tell “noble lies” and fabricate “pious frauds” and conjure up ever more enchanting illusions for the solace of those in torment.”

A clearly established, beyond dispute proof of the resurrection cannot be given. Nothing is conclusive. No one saw Christ rise from the dead. The apparitions could be illusory. The empty tomb proves nothing. One believes in the resurrection or one does not; one dances on the stone or is crushed by it. Do we have reason to dance?

It is frustrating, as Rowan Williams notes, that we are left with such vagueness about “What Really Happened?” Part of the trouble with a good deal of the modern debate on the resurrection is that it turns on the questions of “What *happened* to Jesus?” or “What *happened* to the apostles?” whereas the one thing we can say with confidence is that what happened to the world of men and women was the advent of the Church—of a new style of corporate human life—and of its proclamation of release from the prison of mutual destructiveness.

The interesting theological question then becomes, “How is the phenomenon, the advent of Church and gospel, grounded in the conviction of the return of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead in such a way that neither Church nor gospel would make sense without it?” As A. M. Ramsey put it, “No resurrection. No Christianity.”

We can at least say that the initial experiences of conversion, recovery and restoration—of Peter and the others who abandoned Jesus—were understood as produced by Jesus directly, not through the mediation of the community. That there is again a community depends upon an initiative from elsewhere, an initiative more positive than that provided simply by the report of an empty tomb.

While we cannot say anything about what *happened* with any precision, we can deduce what these experiences meant in terms of grace and hope, the restoring and forgiving of the past, and the commission to preach.

If all possible objections to faith must be overcome before you believe, you never will. If all possible obstacles to faith must be removed before you venture into the unknown, you will never leave the prison of mundane prejudice.

We set out not knowing *how* the objections and obstacles will be overcome. We read Scripture, we study those who explain Scripture, we acquaint ourselves with the basic truths of philosophy and theology, we care for the sick and dying, we feed the hungry, and since faith is a gift, we pray, especially contemplatively. Contemplative prayer, as an old monk on Mount Athos said, is the art of seeing reality as it truly is.

Any search, Hart assures us, if it is to be successful, must be conducted in a manner fitting to the reality one is looking for. In our search for God we are seeking an ever deeper communion with a reality that at once exceeds and underlies all other experiences. Approaching the knowledge of God involves turning the mind and will toward the perception of God in all things and of all things in God. This is the practice of contemplative prayer.

We set out, like the women on that first Easter morning, not knowing how the objections and obstacles to faith will be overcome, and along the way we discover reasons for carrying on, causes for dancing on the vast rock of materiality.

PRAYER: Saint Denys, a Syrian monk (c. 440-c. 539) “As No Other Being”

No. This Endless One we wish  
to know looms ever  
at an absolute remove  
from every pet conjecture,  
all conception, each limit,  
and thought. And yet,  
since that One remains  
the underpinning  
of all that is good,  
and by merely being  
is the utter cause  
of everything, to utter praise  
to this Beneficence, you  
must turn once more  
to all creation.  
He bides there, at the center  
of everything, and everything  
has Him as its destiny.  
Suspecting this, the puzzling  
theologians praise Him  
by every name—and also  
as the Nameless One.