

EXTRAORDINARY Stones

Matthew 28:1-10

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This is strange... This Easter isn't normal. And it's not because our pews are empty and the only congregation present is one small camera and two A/V technicians in the balcony. No, this Easter isn't normal, because no Easter has ever been normal. Today is as it always has been and always will be... It is EXTRAORDINARY!

Throughout the season of Lent, I have been so grateful for the opportunity to walk with you through our extraORDINARY Lenten theme, as we have come to be reminded of God's extraORDINARY love through ordinary objects. I've been exceptionally grateful that Pastor Jill Duffield has walked with us as well through her devotional "Lent in Plain Sight", where each week she gives us an object to consider. Dust, Bread, Crosses, coins, shoes, oil, coats, towels, and thorns... and today, our last object: Stones.

But I won't even call this an ordinary object, because there's nothing ordinary about this day. Just look at the way that stones appear in our Easter story today: *"And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the **stone** and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised..."* Earthquakes and angels and lightning and snow white clothes and NO PART OF THIS STORY IS ORDINARY. Easter will never be normal!

The stone has been rolled away, and with it we receive that promise that our God brings about EXTRAORDINARY transformation!

From her reflection for today, Pastor Jill so beautifully concludes her devotional today, saying this about the stones: *"Transformation happens. Not always. Not easily. Sometimes in fits and starts. But life-infused change comes to those gathered around graves prepared to dutifully execute the rituals of death... All of us encounter seemingly immovable stones. We face loss or illness, disappointment or depression, oppression or exploitation, grief or separation. Circumstances unimaginable become all too real and we feel the pain of slamming into a boulder that refuses to budge. If we remember Jesus' resurrection, and all he taught and lived, angels whisper, "Jesus is risen. Transformation happens. Death does not have the last word."*

Friends, Easter changes everything, because Easter is change. Easter is the transformation of the whole world through God's love. Even death—the great one of life's certainties—has been made foolish in the light of that EXTRAORDINARY Easter dawn. Through the passion, under the cover of the deep mystery of resurrection night, we have each been transformed through grace into a new creation, raised up in new and abundant life for the sake of the world! The stone has been rolled away today and we are being called upon as God's people to run and tell the good news of what God has done for us. While this scene of transformation may be EXTRAORDINARY, we're not meant to linger long at the tomb. As the faithful women run to tell the good news of Christ's resurrection he meets them on the way. Our transformative savior is meeting us where we are. He is there along the road breathing new life and hope into our weary world, into our physical distance, into our upended homes, into our uncertain futures, and he is sustaining us in love to share God's grace. Even when this promise is proclaimed in an empty sanctuary to a scattered church, today is no less Easter. This first Easter message was proclaimed to a gathering of believers who were locked away in their homes, grieving and scared. This is about as normal as Easter will ever get.

Today we gather around a word of hope. It's a hope that no locked room, no tomb, no fear, no doubt, no death can ever hold. We may feel still bound in the tomb, the shadow of the cross may loom *so large* over our world, but the promise of this EXTRAORDINARY day is that God is rolling the stones away. As Pastor Jill said, "*Transformation happens... Not easily. Sometimes in fits and starts.*" God is making a way for new life, new hope, new love, today and every day. I join each of you in sharing the disappointments that we can't be together in person on this special day. As Easter people, we are called to not put this transformation and hope into a box, set apart for one special day. (I know it's Easter, but we're not meant to put all our eggs in one basket...) Instead, we are called to embrace transformation as a way of life. It is Easter today, and it will be Easter tomorrow, and it will be Easter in full-throated proclamation whenever we can safely gather together again. God is always rolling the stone away from the tombs of our life that confine our hope and joy. Whether it's sin, shame, betrayal, or fear, God is always working through grace to redeem us in love that we might join in this joy-filled work of redemption.

One day the dawn will break on this global tomb of COVID-19. One day the stone will be rolled away. I've heard so many people longing to "go back to normal" after all of this. But what is "normal" in light of Easter? As Easter people, as followers of the crucified and risen God, why would we ever want to go back to "normal"? As Easter people, we will have an opportunity in the days to come to truly be the Church, to truly be Christ's disciples. We will be called upon to show the world how to walk out from the tomb, and into new life. I pray that we never go back to normal. Normal was a system where we

undervalued workers whom we now know are essential. Normal was taking relationships and community for granted when those we love were only ever a phone call or FaceTime away. Normal was a breakneck pace that valued money and productivity over the call to self-care and sabbath. Like grave clothes no longer needed, it is time to leave normal in the tomb. Yes in death there is always loss, and we have certainly felt death's sting in this strange season. Even Jesus wept for his friends in the face of death, so it's ok to grieve! But God is already at work in our lives to roll the stone away. We are being called upon this Easter to consider the ways we will walk in newness of life, witness to resurrection, and work to restore God's Kin-dom here and now when this stone rolls a healthy 6ft away from our tomb. Easter does not call us to return to the ways that were death-dealing before. It calls us to be witnesses to EXTRAORDINARY love, and to rise in new life.. in resurrection life.

The hope that is found in an empty tomb is new life, abundant life, life-giving life for all people. Responding faithfully to what God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are being sent out to join in this mission of rolling the stones away. Where there are tombs around us, let us proclaim an EXTRAORDINARY Alleluia! Let us join God in the work of resurrection life here and now! Let us lift up our neighbor, and value their human dignity like we never did before. Let us embrace our communities with new hearts and new hope, where formerly we took them for granted. And in this new life, we trust that Christ will meet us along the way. Normal has had its day. Today is Easter, and with EXTRAORDINARY love, God is still rolling the stones of fear, pain, sin, and shame away.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!