

“Obstacle Gone”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Mark 16:1-8

“They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’” What an excellent question for three women headed into a graveyard at dawn. A solemn sacred feast had just finished, and people were likely exhausted from celebrating, no doubt taking a few extra minutes in bed to recover from the festivities of the night before. There probably wasn’t much prospect for help.

Tombs back then were usually hewn out of the rock, and the rock around Jerusalem, where Jesus had been buried, was predominantly limestone. Solid limestone weighs about 160 pounds per cubic foot. To give you a familiar point of reference, a ream of copier paper is slightly smaller than one cubic foot, and paper weighs a lot less than limestone. (Yes, I measured and did the computations.)

The stone covering a tomb entrance would need to be at least four feet high and a few feet wide, so if the rock was a foot thick, it would have weighed over a half-a-ton, or about 1,300 lbs. No disrespect to the ladies, but that would be a rough job for three husky guys.

Those women came with a purpose, to anoint the body of Jesus with the spices they had bought, but they couldn’t do that until the stone was removed. You see, there hadn’t been enough time after the crucifixion to prepare Jesus’ body for burial properly, because the sun was setting and they weren’t allowed to do such work on a great holy day like the Passover, so here they were, first thing the day after, ready to do a dirty job. The

high temperature today in Jerusalem is forecast to reach 76 degrees. That does bad things to a dead body after a few days.

How frustrating it must have been to overcome so many obstacles – having to wait an extra day to do what they had wanted to do right away; the fear of being tainted by association with a man who had been crucified as a criminal; the natural human revulsion of dealing with decay – yet having overcome those obstacles, to be faced with what seemed an insurmountable challenge: an enormous rock, blocking their way, with slim hope for any assistance. They wanted to get to Jesus, but their way was blocked.

Good thing nothing like that has ever happened to any of us. Good thing none of us have ever wanted to get to Jesus, only to find the way blocked by a seemingly insurmountable barrier.

Good thing none of us have ever faced the obstacle of self-righteous judgment, often coming from those who ought to know better, people purportedly following Jesus Christ. By the time I was twelve years old, I'd lost count of the number of people who told me straight to my face, "You're going to hell," apparently for no other reason than the fact that I didn't attend their church or believe precisely what they did. It made me feel unworthy and ashamed at a vulnerable point in my life, and though I stayed faithful, I did so with a sort of resignation, with little hope of heaven.

Yes, if ever there's been an obstacle to Jesus, the Church – or at least some parts of it -- has proven among the most formidable, much heavier and harder to move than a huge hunk of limestone. That may sound strange, coming from a priest preaching in a pulpit, but it's true. The Church has made, continues to make, and shall always make

mistake after mistake, mistakes that alienate and confuse and hurt people until their spirits are bruised and nearly broken.

It's not that the Church, or any of the particular communities or individuals that comprise Church, intends harm. Quite the opposite, but because the Church consists entirely of sinners, we inevitably do and say regrettable, unhelpful things.

It's easy to blame the Church as the primary, perhaps the sole, obstruction to Jesus, mainly because people often label the Church as an institution or an organization, and such nebulous entities are easy to blame. However, the Church is actually neither, although it frequently pretends to be both.

I can assure you from personal experience and careful observation, that the Church, despite its best efforts, is neither terribly well-organized nor does it function very effectively as an institution, depending upon how you define "function" and "institution." Rather the Church is a collection of communities consisting entirely of sinners trying their best to repent and be forgiven so that the obstacles between them and Jesus might be removed. The by-product of that quest, unfortunately, is that we often get in each other's way, and become an obstacle rather than an aid to that purpose.

Of course, there are plenty of wonderful things about Church that help make up for its deficiencies, and your presence here today is ample evidence of that. If Church were the sole obstacle in our way toward Jesus, we would avoid it altogether, and enjoy uninterrupted access to him. Unfortunately, there are plenty of other obstacles that keep us from Jesus, chief among them, pride.

Good thing none of us have ever been prideful enough to think that we can figure out our own way to get to Jesus, without help from anybody else – or at least, not the

kind of help that comes with a cost, like commitment to a community consisting entirely of sinners. Yet pride can certainly tempt us into thinking that we can connect with Jesus at our convenience, and that when it isn't convenient, then we can do without, because we're able to make it on our own steam, thank you very much, except for those occasional instances when the harsher realities of life intrude, like death or divorce or the dire diagnosis from the doctor.

We definitely want an express lane to Jesus when that type of stuff crops up, but it can be awfully embarrassing to admit that we haven't made it to Jesus all on our own, simply because of the reality that we can't. Fortunately, embarrassment is nothing more than pride's version of whining, so if we get rid of pride, the embarrassment magically vanishes. And how do we get rid of pride?

Well, we can't, at least not on our own. In fact, whatever obstacle is keeping us from Jesus, whether it's certain realities about the Church, or pride, or skewed priorities, or simple sloth, those obstacles aren't going to get moved by us, just like that 1,300-pound limestone rock wasn't going anywhere just because three determined women wanted it out of their way.

No, the rock had already been removed by the time they made it to the tomb, much to their surprise, and perhaps to their horror. It was not what they expected, and they weren't sure what it meant. The obstacle they had been worried about was gone. Now they could get to Jesus. But having found the stone removed, they encountered an entirely different reality to grapple with. And that's how it works with us, too.

The obstacles that prevent us from getting to Jesus can only be removed by the man inside the tomb. It's his power -- not ours -- that grants access to the source of life

and love and forgiveness and reconciliation that brings healing and renewal and hope and joy. That's the promise and the peril of Easter, the power Jesus has to remove the obstacles that separate him from us. It's a power that fascinates and frightens us in equal measure, because it confronts us with a mystery beyond comprehension that strikes awe into our hearts, confounds our reason, escapes our imagination, alters our perception, and bursts the boundaries of what we think possible.

In fact, sometimes we feel safer with those obstacles left in place. We become comfortable harboring our resentments or nurturing our pride. Even though we may know deep down inside that Jesus can move the stone that stands in our way, we may not be entirely sure how eager we are to experience the sort of shock that struck those three women when found an open, empty tomb where a big rock and a dead body were supposed to be.

Such complacency can be the heaviest, hardest obstacle of all, but Jesus can move it, even when we don't want it moved, and that's when life gets really exciting, because that's the dawning of a new day, when death no longer holds sway, when we awaken to find that things are not as we thought they would be, but that indeed Jesus is risen, and that through him, we can be, too.