

Matthew 28
Still Rolling Stones
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* Title slide while scripture is read.

*Rolling stones.

*Not the rock band. The thing that happens when the ground shifts, and the earth quakes. In Matthew's resurrection story, the women arrived at the tomb, not really expecting there was anything to do, they just wanted to be there, close to where he was. Suddenly there was an earthquake, an angel, and a rolling stone...again, not Mick Jagger, although I've heard people joke that he could be that old.

Whether as a literary symbol or in real life, we know earthquakes change things. Even if we haven't experienced one ourselves, we have seen the effects covered on the news, the changes are probably best described as devastating.

*Our televisions show mass destruction; buildings, bridges, and roads collapsed into nothing. People looking disoriented and desperate, searching through the rubble for anything left in one piece. My imagination tells me images like these are the ones the author of Matthew tried to conjure up for his audience when he wrote about the earthquake at Jesus' death, "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split." Chaos. Hopelessness. Jesus' death was indeed devastating. In that moment, as the earth shook, the Empire won and the kingdom of God he talked about seemed lost forever.

But, along with their *destructive* power, earthquakes, and the slow, unstoppable, drifting and grinding of the massive plates that cause them, help make this planet what it is: diverse, beautiful, habitable.

* An earth without earthquakes would be an earth without the dramatic coasts of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest;

*without distinct continents and many of the unique animals, plants and landscapes that inhabit them. Earthquakes churn up minerals from the depths that are vital to life.

*they create mountains, valleys, lakes, bays, and oceans — diverse habitats for all of creation to thrive.

*And in the Gospel of Matthew, it was an earthquake that rolled away a stone and just like that, everything changed.

Just like that. This story sort of explodes with excitement and urgent energy. The guards (a symbol of Empire), there to make sure that stone stayed in place (they had one job), fell over as if they were dead, and at the same time the angel, God's messenger, in his glittery finest, announced that Jesus was alive. We should not be surprised that angels and earthquakes show up in this resurrection narrative. Of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the most dramatic, the most prone to special effects. I feel like he could have worked in some glitter or confetti eggs, but I'm not complaining. Matthew makes it clear, even to the most imperceptive among us, that in his story, we are confronted with new possibilities, God's possibilities, which extend beyond what we can comprehend or imagine. We are reminded that stones, and the ones who try to keep them in place, will not have the last word.

The darkness of Jesus' death on Friday, and the dark reality of Saturday's grief fade into the bright light of a brand-new day; the despair the women must have felt as they walked to the tomb, was replaced with hope when they saw that it was empty; and most amazing of all, death was overcome by life. Jesus was not there. It's a great story. I mean, we are still telling it, right? But the truth is, it would

be just another old story, another legend or myth, if we weren't able to see evidence all around us that that God, even today, is still rolling stones. Resurrection is happening now. Each time a stone is rolled away, there is new possibility and possibility brings with it, hope.

For millions of people in our country, addiction is the stone that will not roll away for them. They feel trapped with no way out. Scientists are learning more every day. This week I read about a cool study that has been done on addiction and the human brain. The results reminded me that resurrection is not just a promise that things can return to the way they were before, but that new life, something even better than before, is possible.

The study I read about included, as its participants, people recovering from severe opioid addictions. All of them submitted to periodic brain scans. As has been well documented, extended addictions slowly reduce the amount of gray matter in the brain. This gray matter is responsible for higher-level reason and self-control. This means that addiction begins to deteriorate the parts of the brain that can most help with recovery.

But this study found signs of hope: Within a few months of sobriety, the gray matter began to return in the brains of those who had been addicted. Within six to 12 months, the gray matter had returned to baseline levels and was about the same as those who had never been addicted. But soon after that is when the most amazing thing happened: Those areas began to form an even greater level of density than for those who had never used cocaine. They were now actually better equipped for recovery than they had ever been, even before their addiction. That is resurrection, that is another chance, a new life.

(Timothy McMahon King, Sojourners: “Death and Resurrection. Addiction and Recovery”)

And it’s happening every day...I’ve noticed other examples of rolling stones in the last couple of weeks:

The stone of racism that plagues this country and most recently burned 3 African American churches in Louisiana...it will not have the last word. Because the people who have donated over 1.8 million dollars on GoFundMe to rebuild the churches are still rolling stones.

The stone of anti-Semitism that vandalized buildings in Oklahoma City a few weeks ago will not have the last word. Because the community members who showed up to help their neighbors clean up the mess are still rolling stones.

The stone of xenophobia that drives unjust immigration legislation and the inhumane treatment of our immigrant brothers and sisters will not have the last word. Because people like celloist, Yo-Yo-Ma, who played his music for refugees waiting at the southern border, are still rolling stones.

The stone of inaction regarding the climate crisis will not have the last word. Because people like Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, is leading her generation as they call for radical legislative action to combat climate change and its effects on the world. Still rolling stones.

The stone of gun violence killing our young people will not have the last word. Because the students who survived the Parkland school tragedy continue to shine their bright lights into the world. They have spoken up and mobilized after 17 of their friends, classmates, teachers, and coaches were killed in a mass shooting with an assault weapon. Their

shared values are protecting lives and drawing attention to needed change in our gun laws and regulations. The students are leading the way toward a more peaceful future, still rolling stones.

The story of Easter calls us to exchange our collective story of death and anger and hatred and division, our tale of rejected immigrants, ostracized LGBTQ+ siblings, vast disparities between rich and poor, withholding of basic rights to those we decide are “the other”, and denial of the obviously eroding planet, for the story of the resurrection of Jesus, a tale that announces that death is not the final word, that life can be hopeful and rich and fulfilling, that love always wins.

(paraphrase John C. Holbert Professor of Homiletics Emeritus, Perkins School of Theology, “The Peripatetic Preacher: Easter for Progressive Preachers”)

Yes, love wins.

This is the love that chose to eat with even the most undesirable people, that refused to accept the status quo, even though it would have been so much safer. This is the love that taught us that even one sheep was worth looking for and we can always come home. This is the love that would not die and could not be contained by a stone, by some guards, or even by our inability to comprehend it. It is that love that wins.

*This is the message the simultaneously terrified and joyful women ran to tell that day. This pairing of emotions, being afraid and full of joy at the same time, reminds me of that overwhelming feeling of a heart that is about to burst, “My heart is full.” It’s how we feel when we fall in love, witness the birth of a baby, lean over the rim of the Grand Canyon, or realize in the midst of a world that tells you otherwise, you are enough. It’s wonderful...and frightening because once we feel that way, we don’t want it to end. It’s hard to understand or explain, but that’s what resurrection feels like. It feels like another chance when you thought you were all out of chances.

All at once I came alive
This beating heart, these open eyes
The grave let go
The darkness should have known
You're still rolling stones

And just like that the impossible is possible. Because God made it so.
Happy Easter. Run and tell the others. Amen.