

Easter Day – Mark 16:-18
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“Who will roll away the stone for us?”

Do you know people who like to plan ahead for things? They're really organized and detail oriented. They have things clocked down to the minute, and even have contingency plans. Then something unexpected happens, and they say, “Hmm, I wonder why I didn't think of that ahead of time?”

A few decades ago, while living in Albuquerque, my daughter and I used to plan camping trips for summer vacations. Isabella was a Girl Scout, and I was a Girl Scout leader, so we knew about planning and we knew about camping. For several years, we had gone on annual camping trips to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. One summer we planned an extended camping trip to different national parks and historical sites in the Four Corners Area. In this trip we started out by going to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, which is less crowded and offers different views of that magnificent natural wonder. We then headed up to Colorado to spend a few days exploring Mesa Verde. We had a beautiful camping site and were quietly visited in the mornings by a few deer. We took guided tours through the ancient ruins, climbed all the wooden ladders, and crawled through carved sandstone arches and caves. By sunset, we were physically exhausted, happily fed, and ready to hit the sack in our cozy sleeping bags.

So far, our camping adventure was exciting, and our trip had gone as planned. But when we arrived near Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell things changed. After an interesting tour of the hydroelectric power plant, Isabella's mood shifted. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, “I just want to go swimming.” Although we hadn't planned to go swimming on this camping trip, we were

fortunate to be near a public beach at Lake Powell with gorgeous views of the wind-carved sandstone. To my surprise, this was not the kind of place where Isabella thought we were going to swim. She wanted to go swimming in an ordinary hotel pool. Unfortunately, finding an affordable hotel with a swimming pool at the last minute during peak vacation season was not a possibility this time. You can imagine my daughter's disappointment that the next place we were headed was nowhere near water or hotels. This made for a long trip home, with me feeling like I had failed as a parent, and my daughter stewing in the back seat with a heart on the verge of turning to stone. Who would roll away the stone for us?

This was not the first occasion in which we talked about how anger, frustration, and resentment could turn our hearts to stone. Swimming in the waters of our shared baptism with Christ, God continues to offer us opportunities to renew our understandings of forgiveness and reconciliation, especially when life doesn't turn out as planned. Planning for an extended family camping trip is one thing. And planning to honor the death of a loved one is another. Especially when that death was sudden and horrifically brutal.

Mary Magdalene, and Mary, and Salome did not have much time to plan to honor the man who had been their teacher and rabbi, friend and Messiah. But they knew from their cultural tradition and experience what needed to be done. After Jesus' crucifixion, in the midst of great shock and sorrow, the women gathered the proper spices to prepare an ointment to anoint Jesus' body for burial. They had to wait until after the sabbath, but early the next morning they brought the ointment with them to the tomb where Jesus had been laid to rest.

Mark's Gospel tells us that the women had watched Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body to a tomb that had been hewed out of rock. They watched as a huge

stone was rolled against the door of the tomb. But they didn't think about that huge stone until they were on their way to anoint Jesus' body. This was not the usual order for honoring a deceased person. Jesus' dead body had been taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb before the sabbath. The women didn't have time to anoint his body before the tomb was closed. There was no orderly manner to prepare for this unexpected situation. There was no planning ahead for this death and this burial.

As the women went to the tomb, they said to each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" The male disciples were nowhere to be found, and if there were guards, they probably wouldn't roll away the stone for the women. When they arrived at the tomb, the women were surprised to find no guards, and were distressed to see that the stone had already been rolled away from the entrance. The tomb was wide open. Jesus' body could have been mutilated or even stolen. Without hesitation, the women bravely entered the tomb to find out what had become of Jesus' body. To their shock and amazement, the body of Jesus was nowhere to be found. But there was a young man in a white robe patiently waiting to greet the women with unexpected news: the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was no longer there. He had been raised and was going ahead to meet the disciples and Peter in Galilee, just as he had promised before he died.

This awesome news was so astonishing that the women were suddenly speechless, and fled the tomb filled with terror and amazement. Even though Jesus had foretold that he would suffer and die and be raised on the third day, the disciples didn't fully understand the message. Even though they had honored Jesus as the Messiah, they couldn't comprehend why he would have to suffer and die, or how he would be raised. When the time came for Jesus to be crucified, there was no

planning ahead to prevent his suffering and death. There was no planning ahead for resurrection. There were no thoughts of meeting him again in Galilee, until now.

In hearing the good news from the angelic messenger, the women were now in a position not to plan and prepare to honor a dead Jesus, but to celebrate anew their relationship with the risen Christ. Amidst the space carved out for the dead, where Jesus was raised, the promise of new hope and new life was made real. The promise of renewed relationships was being offered through God's grace of forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness for the disciples deserting Jesus after his arrest. Forgiveness for Peter denying his relationship with Jesus three times. Forgiveness for those who falsely accused Jesus. Forgiveness for those who tortured, humiliated, and crucified Jesus. Forgiveness for all of humanity's sinful behaviors and evil acts. Forgiveness through the body and blood of Jesus. Forgiveness as a means of healing and reconciliation, and new life with Christ.

The women would eventually tell of their experience at the tomb, and the other disciples, including Peter, would gather to meet Jesus in Galilee. There Jesus would commission them to go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. After Jesus had ascended into heaven, the disciples did their best to share in Jesus' mission and ministry. There were no ready-made plans or an instruction book on how to engage in their new ministry. But the good news had already been implanted in their hearts as they journeyed with Jesus through Galilee and into Jerusalem. From the countryside, to the cross, to the cave.

While accompanying Jesus in his ministry of teaching, feeding, and healing, the disciples learned to be creative and resilient. They learned to be patient and flexible when life didn't go as planned. And they learned about God's grace of forgiveness and reconciliation through the passion of Jesus Christ.

They had witnessed first-hand the basic precepts of the good news of Jesus Christ. It was now their turn to share about their learnings and experiences with all whom they encountered. And when they argued or disagreed about the manner in which they should do God's work, they remembered the tomb. The closed tomb that held the stench of death and decay. And the open tomb that reveals God's ongoing fulfillment of the promise of Easter.

The promise of Easter is the promise of a tomb transformed by God's grace. It is God's promise that the stony hearts of humankind will be rolled aside so that relationships can be healed and made whole. The promise of Easter is not only the assurance of things hoped for. It is God's ongoing promise and fulfilment of eternal life and love.

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