

Year B, Easter 2018  
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“They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’” (Mark 16:3).

Isn't this a perplexing question? “Who will roll away the stone for us?” Still they walked on. I would never have left the house without assurance the stone would be moved and the tomb accessible. Otherwise, everything else would seem to be in vain. Yet they were determined to accomplish that which a setting Sabbath sun had prevented-completion of the traditional burial rituals for Jesus. In this particular case, the women could not move the stone, but they could show up with spices to anoint the body.

Our chaplain in seminary was a character of the best sort. His name was Churchill Gibson. He was loud, cheerful, compassionate, and very, very funny. Churchill came from a long line of Virginia clergymen, his father having been a bishop of “the” diocese. For those of you who may not be aware, Virginia has been and continues to be a major diocese in the Episcopal Church. By the time I came to know Churchill Gibson, he was well into his seventies, a recovering alcoholic, and a man very comfortable in his own skin, but this was not always so. My sense was that he had tried life in the shadow and very heavy expectations of being “the bishop’s son”. After a failed stint of living life as he could not, he tried to live life as he could. It was in the realm of seminary chaplain that he could be himself and put his many gifts for ministry to work for good. It was he who constantly reminded us that “90 percent of ministry is showing up”. He embodied what many of us have experienced; in a time of pastoral crisis, people don’t always remember our words, but they remember that we were present in their time of need.

This curious line, “Who will roll away the stone for us?” is there to encourage us to do what we can for Jesus and trust that God is also working with us in our ministry. First, we must show up. Somehow, some way, God will meet us and work with us, even in the face of death.

Many Christians do a number on themselves when it comes to practicing the faith. Again and again people will tell me about the many things they **cannot** do, especially when it comes to prayer. The best direction that can be given is the old adage to “Pray as you can, not as you cannot”. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome could not move the stone; they could bring spices for anointing, and they did. By showing up, they discovered not a stone but an empty tomb. There they encounter the young man dressed in white who tells them the risen Jesus is not to be found in a tomb but instead “out there”.

Their initial reaction is less than heroic- “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). The earliest manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel stop the narrative right here with this abrupt ending. It is believed that the longer ending was added to curb the embarrassment of later generations. It can be argued that the original ending was an intentional literary device. An abrupt ending “shifts the burden of understanding to the reader” (*Synthesis* April 1, 2018, page 1). We are not merely observers but rather participants in our own lives of faith.

So-called reality television has tapped into a powerful pre-existing condition that most of us possess, the desire to observe rather than participate, to judge from afar without any hint of vulnerability from us. Even in a seemingly benign cooking show such as “Chopped” where four chefs are whittled to one champion over the course of three dishes, the screen shots are angled to invite us to step into the role of judge and become an arbiter of cuisine from the comfort of our Lazy-Boys. All this as the market share of pre-prepared meals continues to skyrocket.

The current manifestation of yourself, the one who cannot pray, the one too busy to serve the poor, the one who worries about what others will think if we become something more than a little religious; you know- too religious; that self must die and trust that there is new life to be had. The template has been set; the path is well-marked; the narrative well-known, but something must first be overcome. It is the same obstacle that for a time obstructed the women and other disciples, and it was definitely not a stone; it was fear.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ will never be understood apart from experience. That is to say, no one can convince you that it is “real” until you have had your own encounter with the Risen Lord. This only happens when we move from observer to participant, when we focus less on the stone and more on walking to the tomb with spices. *Amen.*