

Easter morning, everything was dismal. Jesus was dead, the women thought. Everything seemed dead and hopeless. But the women walked on anyway, to do their duty.

It's always intrigued me that women played such an important role in the Easter accounts of each gospel. The disciples had fled, but the gospel writers all tell of the women being right there, watching Jesus die on the Cross, experiencing the empty tomb after his death. They were the witnesses to the finality - and hope - of it all.

Because Jesus died on Friday, there wasn't enough time to anoint his body before the Sabbath began at sundown. The women were forbidden to do work on the Sabbath. So they had to wait until early on Sunday to tend to Jesus' body.

That's what they were doing in today's lesson. They were going to the cemetery to deal with Jesus' death. They had watched it happen, now they wanted to conduct the proper burial preparations for their friend and Master. As they walked to the grave, they asked themselves an important question: "Who will roll the stone away for us?" This burial stone was really heavy. There was no way three women could roll it so as to gain access to the tomb.

Even so, they went on, carrying their spices. When they arrived, they were surprised, for the stone was already out of the way. The tomb did not hold any death. Because the stone had been rolled away, the women witnessed Easter.

The message shared in the children's time is a good one for adults to hear, too. Our lives are full of things we cannot hope to deal with out of our own strength alone. Death itself, our own or that of someone we love, stymies us. Many other things render us powerless: a dismal diagnosis, an illness or accident. A disability. Drug addiction. A broken marriage. Unemployment or misunderstanding. A wayward son or daughter. Depression. Money problems. Broken trust. All of us know problems and situations we simply cannot manage on our own. (pause)

Determined to do their duty for their beloved Jesus, the women went forward, only to discover that at the very place they were expecting to encounter only death God had something full of surprise and life for them. At Easter, we are reminded that the stone was rolled away long ago, and we are promised that God has a way of rolling away OUR stones even today to let us discover life and hope just where they seem the least possible.

"Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here....But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." (Vss. 6-7) Mark's original ending had the women so afraid that they said nothing...Easter ended in silence. Luke's gospel tells that the women did go and tell the others, but that the disciples didn't believe them! They thought it an "idle tale." So even on that very first Easter, folks had a hard time receiving God's good news.

For those of us today who have trouble believing, the Bible offers good company!

I want to share with you a story, a story of no hope, and then huge blessing. My husband Woody heard it when he was working in a chaplaincy program at Gaylord Hospital in Wallingford.

The hospital had served many functions in its past, but originally it was built as a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. The unofficial historian of the place had come in there as a patient years earlier. His name was Crocket and he loved to share the history of Gaylord. How the T.B. population had dwindled when antibiotics had been developed to combat the disease. Crocket was cured, but chose to stay on and work there as Gaylord underwent many changes. The first change, today's story, begins when Gaylord became a refugee center.

Following W.W. II many East Europeans found themselves to be refugees, unable to return home. Reluctantly, Crocket said, the U.S. government agreed to take in a number of Hungarians. Fifty were to come to Gaylord to learn how to be Americans. "At that time," Crocket said, "it fell to me and one other man to drive a bus down to Washington D.C. to pick up our group."

"No provision had been made for these people; they got off the plane and were sent directly to our bus. Fifty had suddenly become 75 and there was hardly standing room in the bus. It wasn't long before we realized that we had a serious problem. Children were crying, the elderly were complaining. They had not eaten in hours and there was no bathroom on the bus. We could not communicate with them nor they with us, and the tension was almost unbearable. We had a long drive ahead of us, with no place we knew to stop, no money to buy food. They looked to us as if we were supposed to provide something for them that we could not offer.

"About half way to Connecticut we realized that something had to be done. We decided to stop at one of the many restaurants along the road and see if the owner would allow us to use the rest rooms and get a drink of water. If we could do this then maybe we could make it the rest of the way. It was getting late so we pulled into the next cafe that still had lights on. I went in only to hear a man sweeping the floor say, 'We're closed.'

"My inclination was to leave, for I knew the last thing this man wanted to see was a busload of foreigners with no money as he was closing his cafe. I mustered my courage and said, 'We have 75 people on our bus who are tired and hungry. They are refugees from Hungary, and most speak no English, but we would really appreciate being able to use the facilities--we won't be long.' I waited for a reaction as he stared at me, then turned and walked into the kitchen. I feared that he might not come back, but finally he returned with his wife beside him. I repeated my request to her and she said. 'Tell the people to come in and sit down. We will prepare a meal for them. You see, fifteen years ago we too left Hungary as refugees.' Crocket reported that the food was delicious, and that the people sang and danced. When the bus finally pulled out there was a spirit of joy and happiness in the bus and in the eyes of the cafe owners that transcended any words. (End of story, first shared years ago by W. Eddins)

Easter's message: God can provide us joy and hope beyond what we can expect or imagine, if we will but let our hearts be opened to and by God. We only need to ask God to help us with our burdens, the heavy stones in our lives, and our trouble trusting.

If you are here today, you need the Easter story. All of us do. We're here because we need to be reminded of God's power over death as we live in a death-filled world.

Easter is about meeting the Risen Jesus in our daily life and discovering that he can help us with the stones, burdens and dimly rough roads, even as he challenges and guides our choices and the way we spend our lives.

Today is Easter. The basic message is this: Death is not the final chapter in God's book or in your life. Dismal defeat is not the final chapter in God's book or in your life! The invitation for all of us is to let God roll away whatever is blocking us from life in Jesus Christ. It is to move forward in faith, even when the obstacles seem too heavy, too set in stone to be budged. Easter promises that we have a Living Savior with us in every moment, and it gives us assurance, for us and for those we love, that death is a *door*, not an end.

One more illustration: When Europe was beginning to reach beyond its borders in the 12th and 13th centuries, explorers would go forth in spite of fear of the unknown. The Portuguese were exploring further and further down the west coast of Africa. They had a standing order from the Portuguese king, which said, "When you have gone as far as you dare to go, before you turn back, stop along the coast and build a stone tower, a tower that can be seen from the sea." Each ship, as it made its journey down the coast, would take the time at the end of its journey to construct one of those stone towers. Thus, each ship that came after it would be able to look and see that others had made the journey before them, that their fellow country men had been this far before. By this, they would be heartened, and inspired to go a little further and a little further until finally a ship was able to round the southern cape of Africa and make its way to the far east, opening up a whole new world.

Easter is the tower, the tower built right at the edge of whatever frightens us the most, the edge of the unknown of our lives or world, which says that Christ has gone before us, that we need not be afraid. There is no territory uncharted by God. We are never beyond God's loving and redeeming care no matter where we are in our life journey or our death journey.

We scan our horizons and may see all kinds of threats. What will tomorrow bring? How will we manage illness or infirmity? Will life force the life out of us? How can we protect those we love in this life? How can we handle all the world's complicated and huge problems? Our eyes and hearts can be weighed down as we search for solutions we often cannot see. But Easter would remind us that what we cannot see, God can! What stymies us is an opportunity for us to discover what God can do.

The tomb is empty today. The Cross that was first a sign of death is now a sign of victory. For us it is a sight for hope-hungry eyes. It is the promise that Christ goes before us, from a difficult

life through the worst death and into an eternal life that is constantly shared with others. That's what we are offered today. May the stones of our hearts be rolled away so that we can believe in the Risen Lord and live sharing his love and hope with others! Thanks be to God! Amen.