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“Who Will Roll the Stone Away?”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Easter Sunday (Year B)

April 5, 2015

Isaiah 25:6–9; Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24; Acts 10:34–43; Mark 16:1–8

Let me back up and give you an account as to what’s been going on
in the Gospel of Mark’s passion narrative.

Let me back up all the way to Friday’s events, lest you have forgotten the story line.

*At the sixth hour (that’s noon), **darkness** came over the whole land
until the ninth hour.*

And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice,

“Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?” which means,

*“My God, my God, why have you **forsaken** me?”*

And then with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

*Some women were **watching from a distance**.*

*Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger
and of Joses, and Salome.*

*It was Preparation Day, so as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea,
a prominent member of the Council,*

who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God,

went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body...

*So Joseph brought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in linen,
and placed it in a **tomb** cut out of rock.*

*Then he rolled a **stone against** the entrance of the tomb (Mark 15: 33-46).*

You get the gist of the story... darkness over the whole land, deep darkness:
literal eclipse-of-the-sun-like darkness, emotional, breath-catching darkness,
murky church-and-state political darkness,
social, watching-from-a-distance, women-only darkness,
spiritual God-forsaken darkness,
cut off, placed-in-a-tomb darkness,
sealed-with- a- stone, finality-of-death darkness.

The picture is one of total desolation, utter abandonment, dream deferred,
stuffed into a hole, sealed tightly with a stone, deep down darkness.

By the time we get to today's text, we are still in that post-Sabbath shadow
of the third day when the women creep through the night to the tomb.

The word most used in Mark's resurrection story is this: the tomb, the tomb, the tomb,
the tomb. Four times it is mentioned in eight verses.

The tomb: most likely a hollowed out cave in one of Jerusalem's surrounding
limestone hills, would be secured by a stone resembling a wheel,
rolled into place by a downward-sloping track.

The tomb would be closed by gravity.

To unseal the tomb would require a force contrary to nature,
uphill, against gravity and against the weight of the stone. What are the odds?

The overwhelming image in Mark's narrative is the tomb. It stands for death,
for finality, for permanence, for impenetrability, for life-defiance,
for hopelessness, for the dark, desolate end,
for a sentence concluded by giant period made of stone.

The tomb. Have you ever wondered what that felt like,

to be entombed, trapped inside,

or to be ex-tombed, trapped on the outside, with a wall of solid rock between you?

The closest experience that I can conjure up myself is the time that I was trapped,

briefly, for five minutes maybe, in an elevator during a thunderstorm.
Boom, the thunder clapped, the downward motion of the elevator stopped abruptly,
the light in the elevator dimmed, the ceiling fan stopped whirring.
And I panicked about air, and I panicked about light, and I panicked about falling,
and I panicked about being cut off from those on the outside
whom I could hear calling my name from just beyond the shaft.

The tomb. In August 2010, thirty-three men were entombed for sixty-nine days
in a collapsed Chilean mine. Perhaps you recall their amazing story.

Author Hector Tobar tells it in his new book,

*"Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine,
and the Miracle That Set Them Free."*

On August 5, 2010, at the San Jose Mine outside of Copiapó, Chile,
thirty-three unsuspecting miners take their lunch pails,
and "hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go," descend via switchbacks and ramps
a half mile down into the earth to chip flecks of gold and copper
from the walls of the exhausted mine.

Unaware of pending danger, they plug their ears, as is customary,
to protect them from the roar of the machinery.

Thus they fail to hear the escalating rumble of the mountain,
which at about noon, at about the sixth hour,
crescendos into a thunderous explosion, soon enveloping them
as a colossal, dust-filled shock wave.

When the grit settles, this is what they confront:

"the ramp is blocked, from top to bottom, and all the way across
by a wall of rock. To (one miner) Luis Urzua
it looks 'like the stone they put over Jesus' tomb.'

To others it is *a curtain of rock*, and to one miner *a 'guillotine' of stone*.

It's a flat, smooth sheet of bluish gray diorite, and it's dropped
across the roadway of the ramp in the same way *trapdoors* fall

suddenly and theatrically in action-adventure movies...

Only later will the men learn the awesome size of the obstacle before them,
to be known... as a *megabloque*.

A huge chunk of the mountain has fallen in a single piece...

the rock before them is 550 feet tall and weighs 770,000 tons,
twice the weight of the Empire State Building."

(Hector Tobar. *Deep Down Dark*. Ch. 2, "The End of Everything," lac 645)

The tomb: a curtain of rock, a guillotine of stone, a trapdoor, a megabloque.

The miners are cut off from light, from the living, from fresh water, from families
whom they love, from fog-laden breezes, from paternal obligations, from hope.

For 17 days they live in terror without knowing whether rescue is an option.

They endure oppressive heat and humidity, full-body funguses, starvation,
flickering flashlights, bickering among themselves,
more rumbling within the mountain above them, paranoia,
and total, disorienting darkness.

Up above, unbeknownst to them, the women in their lives, the ex-tombed,
mothers, wives, sisters and lovers,

take up the spiritual aspect of their rescue,
setting up a tent city they call Camp Hope,
where they pray and fight for their men.

While on the surface of the mine, a global rescue effort begins

as experts from all over the world participate in the physical task of rescue,
drilling holes to ascertain the exact location of the trapped miners.

The thirty-three down below can hear the steady grind of drill to stone;

for seventeen days, they hear the sporadic turn of that drill.

And whenever it pauses, they say they fear the operation has been abandoned.

"The silence just destroyed us," one miner told Tobar.

"Without a positive sign, your faith collapses. Because faith isn't totally blind."

(Mac McClelland, *The New York Times*. "Deep Down Dark, by Hector Tobar." Nov. 20, 2014)

The miners below fear the operation will be abandoned;
the engineers above fear that the miners have died in the explosion;
the women at Camp Hope continue to pray;
the world watches, via the media, in hushed anticipation.

"And on day 17, as rescuers withdraw a drill they'd used to bore a narrow hole into the mine's emergency chamber a half-mile below, they find a small note taped to the drill bit that reads, 'We're all well in the Refuge, the 33.'"

(Scott Wallace. *Review Hector Tobar's 'Deep Down Dark Chronicles Chile's Mine-Shaft Miracle, LA Times, October 2, 2014)*

After that, it takes another 52 days to drill an opening wide enough,
28 inches in diameter, to lower a man in a capsule into the mine.

This is the part of the book where I started to cry, where it all started
to resonate closely with another story to me.

"To the men who have been trapped for nearly ten weeks, the tall (rescuer) Gonzalez looks impossibly clean and fresh-faced," Tobar writes.

"With a winning smile, big cherubic cheeks, and skin that's been colored
by days spent in the (Alacama) sun, he looks like a visitor from an impossibly
distant world.

'We felt no other people existed,' one of the miners says, 'and now a real, fully alive
member of the human race is here among them.'"

(Hector Tobar, *Deep Down Dark, "Rebirth,"* lac 4435)

I think I started to cry at this point in the book because the story parallels
Mark's resurrection account in so many ways, yet hardly matches it in others.
There is a tomb, the mountain, a shifting sand trap of diorite, copper,
and gold, crumbling under the weight of human pilfering and profiteering.
There is a stone, the megabloque, a massive 770,000-ton impediment

sealing them off from life as they had known it.

There is a cadre of women, the Marys, we might call them,
inhabitants of nearby Camp Hope, who maintain vigil night and day,
refusing to give up on their men.

And there is a *rescue* of the thirty three.

Tobar calls it a *rebirth*, as the mountain spits the men back out onto the surface,
one by one, like newborns blinking in the light as if for the first time.

It's a nail-biting narrative, magnificent adventure literature, a miracle story.

It's a story of global group process and sleepless sacrificial efforts by so
many scientists, engineers, even NASA officials, to roll away the stone,
the megabloque, that stands between the thirty three men
and their loved ones.

But as great as this story is, it doesn't hold a torch to the Jesus story, to the
Easter resurrection story, to our story.

If today's story doesn't make me cry, too, then something's wrong with me!

Our story has a centuries-old promise at its core,

fulfilled in the emptiness of the tomb:

that one day, on this mountain, the shroud that is cast over all peoples
will be destroyed, as God swallows up death forever.

On that day, the prophet Isaiah says, God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and take away the disgrace (of death) from all the earth (Isaiah 25:6–9).

On this mountain, as Paul says, "Death has been swallowed up in victory...

thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

(1 Cor. 15:54, 57)

Our story has divine agency. "Who will roll away the stone?" the people in and around
the San Jose mine ask. Miners, mathematicians, engineers, and NASA experts
will put their heads together and figure out how to drill through
the megabloque to access the miners.

“Who will roll away the stone?” the women at Jesus’ tomb ask.

“And when they looked up, they saw the stone, which was very large,
already had been rolled away” (Mark 16:4).

It would take a supernatural force, stronger than the weight of the stone,
stronger than the gravity which moved it into place, to dislodge it.

God, or an agent of God, we believe, applied the earth-moving force to open the tomb,
which was the force of love, the force of compassion, the force of mercy,
the force of a parents’ love to reach his or her child.

Not human design or human agency, even at its best, could do that.

“If God is for us, who (or what) can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

Our story has Jesus at its heart: the selfless sacrificial being, who even the Roman
centurion came to believe was truly the Son of God.

This was no ordinary man trapped in a political and ecclesial rockslide.

This was *the* suffering servant; this was *the* transfigured teacher; this was *the* healer;
this was God’s Anointed; this was the Word Incarnate;
this was the blameless, spotless Lamb of God,
this was the forgiver of all of our sins.

And God didn’t just rescue Jesus or grant him rebirth from above;

God resurrected Jesus and gave him new life beyond earthly life,
so that we also might have life beyond this earthly existence.

As the apostle Paul puts it, “Christ indeed has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ, all shall be made alive.”

(1 Cor. 15:20)

And lastly, **our story** has a Camp Hope, too. That’s you! That’s the church!

You are the faithful ones who have camped out, maintaining vigil for centuries,
night and day, Sunday after Sunday, little Easter after little Easter,
worldwide, bearing witness to the resurrection, as you have

never ceased to pray,
never given up hope in the promises of a loving God,
never given up caring for the most fragile in your midst,
never left a graveside without an honest mixture of fear *and* amazement,
never neglected to celebrate with flowers, song, hymns and praise,
the mighty power of God to make the dead alive: resurrection!

“The people walking in darkness, in deep down darkness, have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.”

(Isaiah 9:2)

Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ, that this remarkable Easter story
is our story, the stone upon which Christ has built his church. Amen.