

Easter Sunday Sermon

23.3.08

‘The Stone is Rolled Away!’

Bible Readings: Matthew 28: 1-10; 1 Peter 2: 4-10

This week has been a week of contrasts in the gospel stories of Jesus’ last week before his crucifixion. Palm Sunday – the celebration of Jesus entering Jerusalem, as his journey to the cross neared its end. The talks he had with his disciples preparing them for the fact that he would die. His confrontation with the religious leaders and their total inability to comprehend his teaching. His anointing by a woman. The last Supper with his friends.

His betrayal, trial, whipping, and carrying his cross to the point of exhaustion. Being nailed to the cross. Laid in a tomb – and so concerned were the religious leaders and Pilate, the Roman governor, about Jesus’ claim that he would rise again, and that his disciples would steal his body and tell people that he had been raised from the dead, that the guards made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone which covered the entrance to the tomb, and placed a guard there.

This week has been a week of contrasts in the life of this congregation. During this past week, there have been two funerals for people who were closely connected with two of our members. A reminder that death is part of the reality of life. That there is a time to be born and a time to die.

On Friday when we gathered for the Good Friday service, everyone received a stone – representing the theme we are using as a focus for our Easter services. We recalled Jesus’ words about himself: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.’ *Psalm 118: 22*

The stones symbolise the hard places in our lives. The things we need to let go of, but find it difficult to do so. Those stones are now at the foot of the cross. People brought their stone and placed it at the cross – as they handed over their burdens – sin, guilt, problems.

Today, those stones are transformed – as the truth that ‘Christ is risen’ rings out from the cross, and from the empty tomb, because the stone has been rolled away!

Christ is risen! Peace be with all of you, in the name of the risen Christ.

One of the details that is common to all of the resurrection stories in the four gospels is – the stone at the entrance of the tomb where Jesus’ body was laid. As the women made their way to the tomb on the Sunday morning to anoint Jesus’ body, they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’ All of the gospel writers include the detail that the stone was rolled away. The stone is the central physical piece in the entire resurrection story.

Pilate had it placed there for security. Was it to keep Jesus in – or his disciples out?

The stone was what stood between Jesus and his disciples, and between Jesus and the faithful and devoted women who watched his body placed in the tomb, and then came early on that resurrection morning.

I want to ask you this morning, in your life, in your experience, has the stone been rolled away? It may be a stone that still blocks the way between you and an encounter with Jesus. It may be a stone that is a barrier in a relationship that you have that needs to be removed. It may be a bag full of pebbles that when they are piled on top of each other, become as big as a boulder. Selfishness, ego, materialism, abuse of power – the list could go on. They may be weighing you down today.

Will the stone ever be rolled away?

There are stones that build up as difficulties within our society.

We have talked in recent weeks about the growing problem of affordable housing in Australia, and an increasing level of homelessness. There has been concern expressed about the proliferation of poker machines in the poorest areas of Melbourne. Then there is the problem of child abuse, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the tension between different racial and ethnic groups, and the alarm about problems of poor health, education and substance abuse in indigenous communities in remote areas of Australia. It could be seen as a negative picture, and we can ask the question in relation to these problems, 'Who will roll the stone away?'

Some stones have been rolled away

On 13th February this year, Kevin Rudd delivered an historic speech to Parliament when he said sorry for the mistreatment of indigenous people who were the stolen generations. He said, 'The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.'

A monumental stone was rolled away that day.

Earlier this week, the discovery of the HMAS Sydney off the West Australian coast was confirmed. The entire crew of 645 defence force personnel went down with the ship in the Indian Ocean in November 1941, during the days of the Second World War. For 66 years, the ship was missing. Now found. Bringing closure for families of loved ones for whom the HMAS Sydney is their grave.

A stone has been rolled away.

Note: reference was made to the Port Arthur massacre and the response by one of the grieving family members who became the minister of the Nubeena Church of Christ on the Tasman Peninsula, some time after the tragedy.

Note: a personal story was shared about a stone being rolled away.

Do you have stones in your life today? Do you think they are immovable? Do you want the stone to be rolled away? Because Christ is risen – no stone is immovable.