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***STONED***  
**MARK 16:1-8**  
**A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL**  
**ON EASTER SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2024**  
**BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

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When you see the sermon title ‘Stoned’ you might think of Woodstock, the music festival that began on August 15, 1969, where a half a million people converged on a dairy farm in Bethel, New York, for a three-day music festival. Where was I in 1969? I guess in God’s mind. I’ve heard about this festival and seen images of it as well. Some of you might have been there—you don’t have to raise your hands; it’s not confession time. It was billed as “An Aquarian Experience: 3 Days of Peace and Music.” You get a glimpse of the Woodstock bygone days when we pass the peace here in our services (some shake hands, others give a peace sign). Overall, they say Woodstock was a success.

It was known for a lot of rock-n-roll, a lot of rain, a lot of drugs and sex. Even with all those attendees, it was still a peaceful celebration, they say. The Woodstock audience was diverse and a reflection of the changing times. Remember in 1969, this nation was deep into the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, so there were a lot of protests and unrest. Woodstock was an opportunity for people to escape into music and spread a message of unity and peace. The vibe, they say, was harmonious—the hippies were out in full effect living their mantra “make love, not war.” To be honest, some people attribute the lack of violence at the festival to the large number of psychedelic drugs that were being used. In other words, many at Woodstock were stoned, and therefore hallucinating.

But let me be clear that we aren’t hallucinating today when we say Duke is in the elite eight and UNC is at home taking naps. It is truly a great Easter, ya’ll!

But the mood, compared to Woodstock or a Duke win over Houston, is quite different for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome when they bought spices to go and anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb. What they reveal is that you don’t need psychedelic drugs in order to be stoned. They have lost their bearings, since Jesus has died; their mood, their hearts, their souls have been altered, and they aren’t sure what’s happening in their world. The ground has shifted for them, and they face an existential problem and have questions and concerns. “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” They are stoned on their path because a literal stone is in the way of their purpose. This stone blocks their plans and access to someone they love. Although they weren’t the ones entombed, they feel trapped because they’re not sure what to do. They’re stoned.

There are stones that imprison us and prevent us from working freely in the world and moving forward or getting closure. Stones can get in the way of our calling, our plans, our future. I can guarantee that these women are stoned by heart-gnawing grief, not by some drug.

We all have some stones in our lives that need to be rolled away. But the truth is that there are some large stones in life that are just way too big, too heavy, too much for us to move by ourselves. No matter how hard we try, no matter how hard we push, no matter how hard we pray, there are some stones that we can’t roll away in our own strength or ingenuity. The women are not the ones in a tomb but yet feel buried by a stone and ask their burning question, “Who will roll away the stone for us?”

They show up at the tomb, and as if hallucinating, “saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.” There’s no brass, no steel drums, no Jimmy Hendrix, no Carlos Santana, no Grateful Dead, no Easter bunny flashing the peace sign with chocolate eggs, just a young man inside the tomb who signals that he knows how it was removed. He tells them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” The young man with all his meaningful symbolism in the text reveals

that God raised Jesus from the dead and it is God who rolled the stone away. This stone is gone due to divine intervention.

The resurrection, Easter, reminds us that there are some things—like raising the dead—only God can do. Only God can move large stones that block our future and potential. Only God can give us a future. Not Warren Buffett, not Elon Musk, and not even Beyonce with her new country album. Only God! That should be the Easter morning Duke University headline news on Duke Today—only God!

We might sing with the German Eurodance group Snap!, “I’ve got the power!” But don’t get it twisted. The good news of Easter is that God has the wonder-working power to roll stones away, not us! And it is a power bolstered by God’s love for us, a love that is stronger than death. As Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote to clergy about Easter, “our yearly reminder is that Jesus will rise from the dead even if you forgot to print out the right hymns, even if the lilies arrive already wilted, even if the whole choir gets food poisoning. Nothing will keep the stone from rolling away. You are loved.” God’s love for us rolls back the stone. We might think because we pass kidney stones that we can roll tombstones. But only God can do the latter!

And notice that when they arrive at the tomb, the stone “had already been rolled back.” Without human initiative or power, God may answer your question or meet your need before you ever realize it because God works ahead of you. This is why the stone was already rolled back before they even got there. God is always working and is often ahead of our own consciousness and desires. We worry and fret about things when God has already taken care of it. The stone is already rolled back so please don’t get ulcers for nothing. “Who will roll the stone away for us?” God will.

This isn’t March Madness; Easter is God’s gladness! God moving even without our asking. Say that again? God moving even without our asking. Not only was the stone rolled back by God before the women arrived. Notice that there is no direct prayer request or petition to God. They don’t ask God directly to roll the stone away. They don’t even talk to God and offer a long-winded prayer. They talk to each other and ask, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

They don’t ask God to do it and treat him like a casino slot machine—I put this request in and now God you put the answer out. They raised questions and concerns among themselves but it’s as if God heard their cry indirectly and answered it without them asking him for it. God moves the stone without them trying to push it themselves. God hears your heart’s murmurings and questions to each other and knows what you need before you even ask directly. So God is always at work and always listening whether we voice our concern to him or not.

Some battles you don’t and won’t have to fight. Some stones are removed without our doing or asking. So don’t keep trying to remove stones in your own strength when the resurrection shows us that all power is in God’s hands, not our own. Chinese church leader and teacher Watchman Nee put it this way: “God is waiting till you cease to do,” [so] “When you cease doing . . . God can [do].” It’s significant that the stone is rolled away without the women asking God to do it because it reminds us that the resurrection is not about what we can do with all our words, our pleas, our degrees, our certificates, our expertise—our human agency—the resurrection is about divine agency and what God can do and what God has done, and what God will do. God rolled the stone away and raised Jesus! Only God!

And may I be so bold to say that God knows we all need a resurrection. We all need to be ‘eastered’ up in some area of our life. God knows you need a brighter future than your past. And because our future is tied up in Christ’s, know that you, too, will be raised! You may be stoned in your own way right now, but if a stone is involved, watch God work.

When David was to battle Goliath, the Philistine, it took one smooth stone with a sling to defeat that giant. When Joshua wanted to encourage the children of Israel and remind them of God’s powerful hand, he took twelve stones out of the Jordan to remind them that Israel passed over the Jordan on dry ground just as God did for them

in the Red Sea when they escaped Egyptian bondage. And think about what God says in Ezekiel—I'm going to remove the heart of stone from you and give you a new heart, a heart of flesh! And throughout the Psalms and the New Testament, we hear that "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." A stone in God's hands will lead to salvation, victory, and new life just like we see at Easter!

So when you look at this stone building that we call Duke Chapel, celebrate the cornerstone, celebrate the rolling stone, and celebrate the hope of the resurrection! The building is cruciform, reminding us of the suffering Jesus endured on a cross, but the stone structure itself should also remind us that the stone has been rolled back and Jesus has been raised. We are surrounded by resurrection hope this morning—the great cloud of stones.

In the face of the empty tomb, the women were afraid. You can't blame them. As biblical scholar Ched Myers writes, "For Mark, resurrection is not an answer, but the final question." How will I follow? Will you let go and stop trying to move stones by yourself and let God roll away the stone?

A man named Jack was walking along a steep cliff one day when he accidentally got too close to the edge and fell. On the way down, he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror saw that the canyon fell straight down for more than a thousand feet. He couldn't hang on to the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff.

So Jack began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear him and help him. "Help! Help! Is anyone up there? "Help!" He yelled for a long time, but no one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice.

"Jack, Jack. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!"

"I can see you, Jack. Are you alright?"

"Yes, but who are you, and where are you?"

"I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere."

"The Lord? You mean, God?"

"That's me."

"God, please help me! I promise if, you'll get me down from here, I'll stop sinning. I'll be a really good person. I'll serve You for the rest of my life."

"Easy on the promises, Jack. Let's get you off from there, then we can talk."

"Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully."

"I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do."

"Okay. Let go of the branch."

"What?"

"I said, let go of the branch. Just trust Me. Let go."

There was a very long silence.

Finally, Jack yelled, "Help! Help! Is anyone else up there?"

It's hard for us to let go because we think we can fix everything but some things, only an Easter God can do. Let go so that the burdens of your heart can roll away like a stone. Let go for the tomb is already empty, but your future is not. The empty tomb is a womb for a full future in God. Let go and let God. You can't survive on your own. Let go of whatever you're holding on to so tightly and rest in the arms of the crucified risen One, Jesus Christ and find real peace. Don't be afraid because in the risen Lord this peace is also a victory.