

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Easter Sunday  
Sunday, April 5, 2026**

**“And Rolled Back the Stone”  
Matthew 28:1-10**

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“After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb” (v. 1). This story doesn’t begin with resurrection or new life; it doesn’t begin with hope or possibility; it begins, in the darkness at the edge of dawn, with a long, painful walk to a grave. These two followers of Jesus had watched helplessly as he was killed by the Romans; and as for everything they’d hoped for in Jesus—that’s all gone now. He died, and there’s nothing left—nothing, except to visit his grave.

Now, to be clear, these two followers of Jesus—both named Mary—they are exceedingly brave; it took enormous courage to visit the grave of someone who’d just been executed by the Romans Empire. They’re brave, for sure—but are they hopeful, excited, expectant? No, of course not; how could they be? Why on earth would they have any sense of hope or possibility on this long walk to the grave?

And notice what they’re planning to do. In the other Gospel accounts, we’re told that women rose early that morning to care for the body of Jesus, to anoint him for a proper burial (Mark 16:1, Luke 23:56-24:1). But in our Gospel Lesson this morning, Matthew doesn’t say anything about that. So what are they going to do instead? Why are they walking to the grave? According to Matthew, they “went to see the tomb” (v. 1). That’s it; nothing else. Why did they rise early and take that long, painful walk? Solely “to see the tomb.”

In the original language, in Greek, the word here for ‘see’ here can also mean ‘to be a spectator’ (Trenchard) or ‘to study’ (Niedner). That gives you a sense of what this mournful day held for these two believers named Mary. They weren’t intending a quick visit; no, they were planning to stare at that tomb and scrutinize it. And can we blame them? Of course not! What else is left them; what else *can* they do? In the death of Jesus, they had seen love lose, brutality triumph, and their hopes evaporate. So what’s left? What’s left is to go look at that cold symbol of finality and death; what’s left is to see a tomb.

And I wonder: are we really much different? Did we come here this morning truly expecting resurrection and risen life? Or did we expect not new life but a tomb? If you’re going through a difficult time right now, your struggles did not go away just because it’s Easter. To the contrary: when things aren’t going well for us, this day can come as a painful reminder of our struggles; Easter can be difficult when its message of hope seems to clash with our own feelings of hopelessness.

On that first Easter, those two mourners “went to the see the tomb”—and don’t we do the same? They went to stare at that symbol of loss and death and defeat—but don’t we do that? In our thoughts, in our memories, in our habits, in our attitudes: don’t we return, over and over, to our own

losses, our own failures, our own griefs, our own regrets—our own tombs? Think for a moment: what tomb have you been going to see? What failure or loss, what grief or regret have you been returning to?

We do this, right—sometimes without even realizing how often we frequent that tomb. I didn't need to give you much time to reflect on this; you know exactly what that tomb is... You've been there enough times; we know very well what tomb is at the end of our well-worn path. We know what it looks and what it feels like... And we also know how that tomb can become customary—even comfortable. Sometimes it's easier to give up and give in and concede a comfortable defeat; sometimes it's easier to have a ready answer as to why our lives and our world can't possibly get better; sometimes that's easier than accepting the responsibility of living into the hope of new life—for us and for others.

On that first Easter, those two mourners walked to the tomb—something we know all too well. Yet then...this happens: “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it” (v. 2). They went to see the tomb, thinking it was all that was left for them; yet then God, out of kindness and compassion, interrupts the hopelessness that had taken hold—and an angel descends to break that tomb in two. That rock had seemed as unmoveable as death, yet God rolls death—and the rock—away.

And not only does the angel knock the rock aside, the angel—Matthew tells us—“sat on it.” That's really quite a plucky thing to do, isn't it—because the angel didn't really *need* to sit down, right; this is a choice. In total “defiance of death” (Willimon), the angel plops himself down on that rock, basically thumbing his nose at this symbol of death and hopelessness. It turns out, the tomb that had seemed so final, so definitive, so powerful—it turns out that tomb was no match for a loving God.

Because God—in God's kindness and compassion—God doesn't allow the tomb to get the last word. God breaks open that tomb and does what no one could have expected or imagined or hoped to see. Those mourners went to see a tomb, a symbol of the triumph of death over life in Jesus—yet they instead find that the tomb could not contain him, that death could not imprison him, that—in Christ and by the grace of God—death must give way to life. Those two mourners, as they took that long walk to the grave, could only have felt overwhelmed by death; yet then they discover that death has been overwhelmed by God.

That first Easter, those two mourners went to see a tomb—but they never got the chance! They expected to stare at a tomb—but before they could, it was already shattered; they went to find a tomb—but instead they found the kindness and compassion of God, whose love had undone death and broken the tomb.

Rather than the stark silence of the grave, they instead hear an angelic voice announcing that—in place of hopelessness, in place of death, in place of the tomb, God has given them a Risen, Living Lord—who is a sign, a beacon, an embodiment of life to come. “[T]he angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised’” (vv. 5-6). It's as if the angel says: ‘I know you came here looking for a tomb; I know you expected death and defeat and an unhealable hurt. Yet,’ the angel says, ‘God's kindness and compassion were too much for that tomb—and death has crumpled under the weight of grace.’

And what of our tombs? What about the tomb at the end of your well-worn path? What about that loss, that grief, that regret, to which we keep returning? Easter obviously doesn't just fix everything; we know that. That tomb of ours is still there; that loss or grief or regret still holds sway... And yet—and yet in the shattering of Christ's tomb, in the dislodging of that stone with its death and finality—the hope of Easter means that cracks are appearing in our tombs, too. Because God broke open Christ's tomb, our little tombs will not, in the end, stand a chance.

Christ is risen, so those tombs of ours won't get the final say; they won't get the last word. Those tombs have power over us, but not over God—and in these tombs, cracks are appearing; God's kindness and compassion, revealed to us in raising Jesus from death to life—this brings hope that is stronger than any tomb. When those two mourners named Mary went to see the tomb, God broke it; and when you go back to see whatever your tomb may be, know that it's starting to crack—and God will, in the end, snap that tomb in two. Amen.