

Easter Morning 2010

Matthew 28



Isn't that a great image? An angel, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone

And sat on it. *That stone – a big, ugly, heavy stone of death*

Solid, with the twisted and tortured side of this world that we sometimes know too well

That stone just sat there, blocking the tomb. It looked as though death had won. It was over.

And as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb, hoping beyond hope that it had been a bad dream; that it wasn't real and that the light of the dawn would somehow bring relief....there, to remind them how wrong they were, how much they had lost, like a final punch in the pit of the stomach....there sat that stone. Just sat there, mocking them. Cold. Heavy. Silent.

And suddenly..... (read verses 1&2)

The angel not only rolled it away, but sat on it. That's just great. A saucy, defiant, delightfully in your face gesture. As if to say to death – so there!

The angel rolled it away – that death stone that thought it had won....rolled it away, and sat on it. To me, just imagining that is sermon enough. (Ah but you KNEW that was too good to be true!)

And I didn't quite know what to say after seeing the angel sitting there....to me it's just perfect the way it is. And so I'll tell you what I did – I asked the angel. Asked him what he thought. What else there was to say. And you know....he was quite surprised that I had asked – apparently not many people do – and he told me some pretty amazing things.



And even though he'd love to be here today to tell you all about it personally, and even though you've each talked with him before, (some of you knew it and some didn't) and even though you'll talk with him again, and can do so any time your eyes and ears are open – still, he wasn't sure if everyone was quite ready for an angel in full white garb, with wings and everything (because of course on Easter morning they're all in full dress garb) so he told me his story and asked me to tell it to you. So...this is what the angel said.

Rolling that stone away was the most awesome thing I had ever done in my life until then – or since – and we angels live long lives! As I sat on that stone, more than one miracle happened. But I'm getting ahead of my story. I sat on that stone a long time, long after the women had run away. Excited - Afraid to believe what I had said, afraid not to believe it....and a look in their eyes that was strangely familiar to me.

They left....I stayed. I sat and tried to sort out what had just happened.....to Jesus, to the world – and to me. And I thought back to the very beginning. Long before any of you could possibly remember, I had a bit of an argument with God. Angels were created almost right away after God began – all this.

We were created in between the sun and the moon – and the animals I think, because I remember even though I was a very young angel, I remember God creating the animals. I especially loved the giraffe and the platypus. They made me laugh. And those peacocks.....how wild is that?

Well...we angels had been around quite a while and were really enjoying the creation – when we found out that God wasn't finished yet. God had another plan.

We found out God was going to make something called "humans". I looked at the blueprints....I wasn't impressed. To begin with, they were going to be made from clay. Too earthy for me. Humans from the humus. It was like making them from...well...from stone. Actually, it IS making them from stone.

But that's not the part that bothered me most. They were going to be built with all these extra part....feelings. Emotions. I'd never heard of them....Angels don't have anything like that and thank goodness I say. It saves so much time and energy that way. But these humans were going to have them – and not only that...emotions, dreams, feelings, ideas, passions and - get this -*free will*. Hello???? Not a good combination, don't you think? It looked like trouble to me.

I spoke to God about it – but God just got that look in the eyes...I'd never seen it before, but I certainly have since

God's eyes just got that look of excitement and anticipation and fierce pride and the most tender love, and God said "They're going to be my pride and joy – made in my image." God's image? I looked at God, looked at the humans -frankly, I couldn't see it! But there's no talking to God when God gets that look....So I let it be and tried to ignore them.

THAT didn't last long. OUR job, God said, was to be God's messengers to them. And to make it worse, God said that most of the time they wouldn't be able to see us, and when they do see us they won't realize who it is they're seeing – and *not only that*, they're probably not going to pay attention to what we say anyway. Great, I thought. Just great. Lots of job satisfaction here.

But God said something else then....God said that... for all their ability to think and dream and feel, humans won't have the capacity to fully remember where they came from and why they were created and they won't be able to see God in the way angels do.

And I began to feel sorry for them. A sad existence, really....but our job was to remind them. Sometimes to visit them as other humans, sometimes in their dreams, and sometimes, visit them in the form of loneliness. And when we visit, God said, they would *almost* remember....they'd get a hint or a glimpse of what they're made for and what their end will be.

And that's what happened, for a while. God went ahead and made them, and we were the messengers. They were....so pathetic, in a way. So full of possibilities, and yet so limited. They could do wonderful things...then turn around and be selfish and cruel. I didn't understand them.

I'd just shake my head and try to do my job....and once in a while, when I'd go to visit someone, they'd know. They'd get a strange look in their eyes, not unlike that look that God gets....

Or I'd visit someone and they wouldn't know but....just as I was leaving, they'd turn around with a puzzled, questioning look – eyes wide, and I knew they knew. But then they'd forget again. And the hardest part was watching God in it all. God would ache for them when they'd fail....wanting so much for them to reach out and be the best they could be...and weeping for them when they were not.

And often, I'd get fed up. I'd say "the trouble with these humans of yours, God is that they are too complicated. Too many moving parts; too many possibilities. They're like rocks...you can throw them at little birds to hurt or kill them...*or* ...you can use them to build those same birds a bird bath. Too many possibilities. Choices. You should have made them with fewer feelings – not so many ideas. Thinking keeps getting them into trouble. They don't even do it well! Loving too. Makes them all confused.

God, being God and all, didn't pay any attention...just kept coaxing and calling them. Loving them and hurting when they hurt themselves and each other. And we kept doing our job.

And all through.....I kept thinking – just like rocks. The rocks they had to get rid of to clear that land to farm it. The rock of Mt Ararat, reminded me of that horrible flood, the rock Moses struck, when God made water gush out, all because they had complained so loud

The rocks they used to build altars and temples to praise the Holy One...and then turn around and stone each other to death – it was all too much for me. And so for me, "stone" became my way of summing up all that was wrong with them. Made from clay, too many choices...selfishness, greed, fear...stupidity. They were just like stones. They could keep their feelings and choices. Me? I'll keep my wings.

I tried not to think about them.....but just when I'd get completely fed up, one of them would help a friend, or write a poem, or one of them would hold a newborn and get that look....or recognize me...and I'd have hope again. It went on like that for a long time.

THEN one day, God surprised us again. I thought God had used UP all the plans that didn't make sense when humans were created but – no. Here was another idea we angels couldn't quite grasp.

The plan was....I can hardly believe it even as I'm telling you – the plan was for God's very own self to go to earth AS ONE OF THEM. God had always been on earth and with the earth...but this time, the fullness

of God's being to go to earth as a human? How was THAT going to work? But – God is God – and so we did our jobs.

It was a friend of mine who went to Joseph

And I spoke to the girl Mary – just a child, really but strong and trusting and she had - not to put too fine a point on it – she had guts. I can still see the look in her eyes as I spoke to her. I'd seen that look before.

And then, when the child was born – and all of us sang...every angel in creation – and our singing seemed to shake the rocky foundations of the world

“Glory to God in the highest!” we sang: “And peace on earth – good will to all!” I sang for all I was worth that night. We all did. We sensed something momentous was happening – but we had NO IDEA how it was going to turn out. I wonder if we would have sung like that if we had known?

The child grew....and for a while, I thought everything was going to be fine. You know his story as well as I do – I remember ministering to him after his temptation in the wilderness, and wondering why he had to go through that. He could have turned the stones to bread, but no – he stayed with the stones, and nearly collapsed from hunger. He stayed with the stones. And that's when it began to dawn on me...THAT'S what this whole crazy idea of God's MEANS. He stayed with the stones.

Remember how I said that time, stones had become a symbol of everything that was wrong with them? Their earthiness, fear, deafness, stubbornness selfishness and cruelty....All of that is a separation from God. You call it sin. Separation from God. Stones.

And in Jesus – God stayed with the stones, even though it would have been easier and less painful to turn them to bread. It never could have done what needed to be done. It could have never ended up like this any other way. It was hard to watch.

Jesus – God's precious, unique, invaluable, cherished child, in whom the very presence of God was pleased to dwell....Jesus entered fully into everything it means to be human. He stayed with the stones. He entered and took upon himself what is most ugly and fearful and alienated about being human

And it was only in doing that, that the real beauty of being human could be seen as well. That seemed to be his message and his life – stay with the stones – enter the pain and the fear....not to see it as “out there somewhere” but as part of YOU – part of being human. Only then would people be free to see and be the beauty as well.

On the one side the sin On the other side the glory

Both intimately part of every human. Held together. You can see what happened – it's an invitation to new life....but it comes like this (make cross)

I'll never forget that night in the garden. There, among the sharp stones that cut his knees as he knelt to pray And we went to him and gave him strength, but we couldn't take the pain away....

I couldn't believe what was happening. I never thought God would let it go that far.

And then...not long after that, we know how far it was REALLY going to go. The trial - the whipping - when they actually nailed him on those boards there was stunned silence in heaven. Every single angel in heaven was there....ready at a moment's notice to swoop down and free him

Looking at God, desperate for permission – as if to say DO SOMETHING! Let US do something!

But God stopped us with a head shake and the look in God's eyes at that moment? I never want to see that again. And so we stood there and watched. Helpless – and then it was done.

And it wasn't until they put him in the tomb that I got a hint...just a tiny glimpse – of what had happened. They put him in the tomb. And that tomb was made of – stone. It was made of stone!

For the last time, he stayed with the stones. He entered the stone completely. Took onto himself the totality of what it is to be human – even to death. He entered that stone tomb.

He wasn't killed because it was God's will – he was killed because humans couldn't face the truth – the truth of their own stones – and their own glory. The truth that being human means the beauty – AND the beast. The truth that as much as his life had lifted our eyes skyward, the voice of the dove, the call of the eagle, and our own angelic chorus....the truth is, he is grounded. In the earth. In the mud and the glory of being fully human.

In the end, no bird sang.

In the end the earth swallowed him

As it swallows us all.

And all through the rest of that Friday, and all day Saturday and into the night again

All of heaven was silent. Not a sound, not a whisper of an angel, not a rustle of wings. Nothing.



Sunday morning, just as the sun began to rise, there was a deafening noise. The earth and the heavens shook – and God said, with eyes intense and sparkling – God looked at me and said GO!

I said "What'll I do?" God said "You'll know when you get there. GO!"

God was right. When I got there I knew. I just did. It had something to do with the faithfulness of the women who had come to the tomb. It had something to do with the sun coming up and the beauty of that, and the earthquake that had shattered the rocks all around and helped me see

But it was more than all that. I just knew.

And I looked up at that huge rock blocking the tomb, and I thought of all the pain and rejection and the vicious cruelty that rock represented and I felt it heavy inside me – but I also felt something else.

It didn't have to block the tom – it could be used for something else. It had a purpose – and that purpose had been changed – forever.

I have a huge push – it rolled aside, and I – I sat on it. Sat on the rock, beside the empty tomb. And I knew without a doubt, without looking inside, that the tomb was empty – and that sitting on that rock was the most important thing in the world. That the world had changed, forever.

How it happened – I have no idea. Only God knows that. THAT it happened – is my faith...my belief that it happened is is....rock solid.

Jesus was raised from death by God. The way to face and overcome the beast, the stony fear and silence of the world is not to avoid it, not to point and say it's over there ...life wins by touching death. Life wins

You confront it by touching it, by entering the rock. Then rolling it over and sitting on it.

Jesus is alive! Life and love abide. That's the best news you're ever going to hear.

PS I told you at the beginning that there was more than one miracle that day. And the second is this: As I sat on that rock and told the women the news that he was alive – and as I looked into their eyes, wide with disbelief, fear, red from lack of sleep and weeping...yet full of hope and willing in spite of everything to believe... A miracle happened in ME.

I was the one who told God NOT to make humans and all along I mistrusted them and at best pitied them

But as I looked into the eyes of those women...I'd seen that look before. I knew they WERE in the image of God, and I knew that God loved them so much and that in spite of all their fumbling and fear and limitations, - or maybe because of them

I thought "what a glorious thing it would be to be one of them – what a privilege to be a human being."

And that was the second miracle of Easter day.

And that's what the angel told me. Just one last thing – he said that even though he couldn't be here in the pulpit today – he'd be in the congregation, in disguise.

Perhaps you're sitting next to him now. As we share the feast of love with our risen Lord be very aware of who you're sharing it with. You may be entertaining angels unaware.

Christ is risen and all the people said -

He is risen indeed! Amen and – rock on!