

FALLING ROCK ZONE

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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. (Matthew 28:2)

Last month my family and I were driving home from a college tour in Vermont. With no traffic to fight, no taxis to dodge, and everyone else asleep, I began noticing road signs and actually reading them. One yellow government sign that I frequently saw proclaimed: FALLEN ROCK ZONE. I thought to myself, “what a curious way to phrase the warning.” I mean, if indeed a rock had fallen onto the road, why not just remove it rather than taking the trouble to put up a sign to identify it? Then again, I work for the church, not the government, so it could be that these mysteries simply elude me. In other places the same type of sign reads differently: FALLING ROCK ZONE. Some “falling rock” signs even depict the rocks in flight, falling onto a car or a stick figure holding its arm up for protection. If it comes to that, don’t you think it’s a little late to be reading a sign?

I began thinking that fallen rock and falling rock zones are altogether different things. As I drove I remembered a story that my parents used to tell to my two brothers and me. In fact, I called my mother this week and had her retell it so I’d have it straight for you. Apparently, back in the 1930s my grandmother’s niece eloped with a rakish fellow named Herbie Merritt. Everyone suspected that Herbie was up to no good with his life. He was “in the racket,” said my mother. In fact, one day he and two other small-time crooks were driving along the Storm King Highway in upstate New York. They were in a two-person coupe with a rumble seat in the back. Herbie was in the rumble seat, clutching a briefcase full of counterfeit bills. Suddenly, a huge rock from the cliffs above let loose, and with pin-point accuracy, it landed directly on Herbie in the rumble seat. The driver of the car and the passenger next to him received not a scratch. But as for Herbie, that was it for him. He was no more.

The story became something of an all-purpose cautionary tale that my parents would deploy whenever they thought we were contemplating a life of crime, or needed a reminder of life’s brevity, or simply not paying attention. Remember Herbie Merritt. Beware of falling rocks. Falling rocks and fallen rocks are not the same thing.

You may ask: why, on this Day of all days, am I telling you about the hapless Herbie Merritt and the nuances of highway road signs? I do so because it all makes me wonder about Easter. Is Easter a FALLEN ROCK ZONE? Or is Easter a FALLING ROCK ZONE? Many preachers today in pulpits around the world, taking their cue from Biblical scholars and Christian apologists, will declare emphatically that Easter is a fallen rock zone. Note the past tense, indicating that the resurrection actually happened at a certain time and place. The great stone sealing the tomb of Jesus has fallen, and it forever rests like an immovable rock in the roadway of history. The fallen stone revealed to the first witnesses that the tomb was empty, no longer containing the crucified body of Jesus that had been placed there just a few days earlier. What is more, the Gospels tell us that the women who arrived at the tomb and discovered the fallen stone received word that Jesus had risen. He who was dead on Friday was now alive again on Sunday. The heavenly messenger told them to go tell the disciples, and then go to Galilee, where they would see Jesus. What did it all mean? Could it be that death did not have the last word, there or anywhere else? The women fled the tomb in fear, but with great joy. It was the greatest news they could have heard.

But is it – was it – fake news? Ever since the day the stone fell skeptics and cynics and honest questioners have suspected that the followers of Jesus somehow orchestrated the whole thing, and spread the news for their own gain. Thus, many Easter messages will aim to counter such charges and bolster the historical reliability of Jesus' resurrection. What the Gospels say happened, really happened. The fact is, the Gospels themselves are too clumsy and inconsistent to be part of a conspiracy. Was it one woman at the tomb, or two, or three? Was the messenger a young man, or two men dressed in dazzling white, or one angel, or two angels? Clearly, if a fraud were afoot, the early church would have seen to it that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had their stories were straight. Also they would have written the women witnesses out of the story and replaced them with men, because those were the days when a woman's word was not to be counted on in a court of law.

The truth is, the early church didn't iron out the embarrassing wrinkles. Why not? The most plausible answer is because the early church didn't invent the resurrection. Instead, the resurrection invented the early church. Without Easter Day, no group of Jesus' followers would have stayed together long enough even to become the early church. No such group of Jews would have dared think about changing their worship day from the Sabbath to Sunday. But they did change it because they believed that through the resurrection of Jesus, God affected the 8th day of creation. The Psalm (118) we heard the choir sing today had been fulfilled: *The same stone which the builders refused, is become the headstone in the corner. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.* I give thanks for the defenders of Easter as a fallen rock zone. It means a great deal to me that what we celebrate today is no mere metaphor, no lovely sentiment alone, but something that happened in history, with a signpost planted beside the roadway pointing to it.

Nevertheless, a fallen rock is of limited appeal. It is inert. It is immobile. You may slow down and steer around it. You may even stop the car and marvel at it, saying, "Ooh, how did this get here?" But chances are, sooner or later you will lose interest and keep on driving. But a *falling* rock zone is much more interesting, much more urgent, and much more dangerous sort of thing. In fact, today I rise to declare that when you travel the road of Easter, when you fully grasp the meaning of the resurrection, when you come inside this church, you are entering a falling rock zone. Note the present tense, indicating that the resurrection is as much a current reality as it is an historical event or a future promise. "Ah," you say, "he's bringing things around to the capital campaign to restore the ceiling so that chunks of plaster will stop falling on our heads. I knew it!"

Actually, it's not the capital campaign, but the Gospel of Matthew that compels me to reflect on the ongoing nature of the resurrection. Matthew makes a unique contribution to the Easter witnesses. In the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, by the time anyone arrives at the tomb of Jesus, the rock has already fallen. The dust is settling. It is the calm after the storm. But in Matthew, the storm is in progress. In fact, it's not a storm, it's an earthquake. The rocks are falling. The scene is chaotic. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb as the angel of the Lord descends from heaven and rolls away the stone. The guards quake in fear, and so, presumably do the women. But an earthquake? Really? You would think that if an earthquake had actually occurred, the other Gospel writers would have written about it too. How are we supposed to take seriously an earthquake that no other Gospel, nor any other historical source even mentions?

Think about it this way: Matthew was more than a reporter relaying just the facts. He was an artist, a storyteller. The earthquake is like his musical score by which he invites his readers to sit in the rumble seat themselves as the two women pull up to the tomb. What Matthew means to convey is not so much a literal earthquake, but that in the resurrection of Jesus, an earth-shaking event is occurring. He takes us ringside and gives us a very present, urgent resurrection in real time, as the rocks are falling. He means to suggest that if the women could wander into the midst of the resurrection while it was happening, then perhaps all of us should expect to see stones falling

from the citadels of evil and death in our time. For Matthew, resurrection is eternally now, when heaven and earth overlap and intersect and mingle together.

Matthew's perspective should remind us of a simple detail of the Easter story that I think good, spiritual people often neglect: Jesus returned to the world, to this life. Yes, Easter gives us hope in the face of death. Of course, Easter means that we now have a reasonable and holy hope for eternal life. Death is not the end. We can sing with the Psalmist: *I shall not die, but live*. It is the greatest good news for Herbie Merritt, and all of us future dead people, no matter where we happen to fall on the spectrum between sinner and saint. But Easter is as much about the here and now as it is about the hereafter. The movement that God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven has begun, and nothing can stop it. It may move in fits and starts, more slowly than we might like, but God's Word has gone forth into this world. It shall not return empty. Thus, the resurrected life of Christ is available to us in real time – now. When we recite in the Nicene Creed, "*We look for the resurrection of the dead,*" we don't mean a day far off in the future. We mean today.

The phrase could easily serve as the mission statement of a church. What do followers of Jesus do? *We look for the resurrection of the dead*. St. Paul meant the same thing in the portion of his letter to the Colossians we heard today: *Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*. Look up. Look out. Danger: this is a falling rock zone. It has been decreed that the spiritual forces of wickedness that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God do not win. They lose. What is more, you and I should expect to see the carefully guarded stones protecting their culture of death falling even today, from this time forth, and forever.

What does it look like in our day? I recently read a story about the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott that in many ways served as a flashpoint for the civil right movement in this country. By late 1956 the boycott had made some strides, but it was faltering. The Klan was actively menacing participants, and the city was seeking a legal injunction to shut down the carpools that blacks had organized to get themselves to work. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in despair, fearing that he had let down the people who had put at risk their jobs and welfare under his leadership. Suddenly, at a particularly grim time, amazingly good news reached them. The U.S. Supreme Court had upheld a lower court ruling that Alabama's bus segregation laws were illegal. A great victory had been won, and black Montgomery was jubilant.

As jubilant as boycott participants and supporters were, the Klan was equally angry. That night they organized forty carloads of Klansmen to conduct intimidating drives through black neighborhoods. Normally, when the Klan came cruising through their communities, blacks would stay inside, keep the lights off, and their doors locked tight. On this night, however, something was different. They opened their doors, turned on their lights, and came out onto their front porches. They smiled and waved at the costumed Klansmen as they drove by. Somehow, in the new light of victory, the formerly fearsome robes and hoods didn't appear fearful at all. They looked silly, ridiculous, even pre-pubescent. Many blacks on their porches not only smiled and waved, they laughed. Dr. King commented that they acted as though they were watching a circus parade go byⁱ. The movement that God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven has begun. Nothing can stop it, and all of heaven rejoices – and laughs.

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. It wouldn't surprise me at all to learn that the angel sitting on the stone was laughing. This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice, and laugh, and be glad in it. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

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ⁱ Marsh, Charles. *The Beloved Community*, Basic Books, 2005, p. 47.