

Two Stones Matthew 28:1-6

This morning as we gather to celebrate the Resurrection, I want us to think about two stones... Two stones that remind us of hardness, separation and death; two stones that present a monumental problem between us and God; and two stones that had to be removed for us to have hope, freedom, and life.

The first is a tomb stone – not the kind of tombstone we're used to seeing out in the cemetery. Those simply mark the graves and identify the bodies underneath. The tomb stone I'm talking about is a stone that actually covered the entrance to a tomb and sealed a dead body inside. (Picture) One of these was rolled over the entrance to the tomb in which Jesus' body was laid.

At the end of the day on what we call Good Friday, Jesus breathed his last, gave up his spirit, and died. So his lifeless body hung there on the cross to the dismay and disbelief of all his disciples. Their fears came true and their hopes were destroyed and they went into hiding. Jesus was dead.

We read in Matthew 27:57-60: *"When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away."*

That's the first stone. A stone that sealed the tomb in which Jesus' body lay. As long as that stone was in place, that meant Jesus was dead, and that presents a massive problem for all of us. As awesome as Jesus was in his life and ministry – healing people, casting out demons, proclaiming truth, showing true love and compassion – and as amazing as his death was and willingness to suffer and die for others, even though he himself was innocent, if that's all that happened, and we were left with a dead body in a tomb behind a great stone, everything he did in his life and death would have been proven to be worthless. The Apostle Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 15:17-18: *"If Christ has not been raised, (if he's dead in the tomb) your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."*

A dead body in a tomb would have meant that Jesus was a fake – a zealous man who was convinced his own deception, but in the end was a false teacher. He would have been just another Jewish fanatic who died for his cause and would disappear into history. And that's the way things were looking to Jesus' disciples as long as that stone was in place, as long as that body was dead. All their hope and ours for all of who Jesus was, and is, and will be – all our hope for forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life would be lost if that stone stayed in place, with Jesus' dead body behind it.

That's the first stone. The second is equally problematic. And it's a stone that's found inside each one of us, including you and me. We are born with a heart of stone. (Picture) It's there because of sin. It goes all the way back to our first ancestor in the Garden of Eden who directly disobeyed God and was changed – and all his offspring after. Sin entered the hearts of man and turned our hearts to stone. Sin is rejecting God to go our own way, and we've been doing that from the beginning. We don't need to learn how to do it, we sin automatically because it's part of who we are. It comes from a heart of stone – a heart that is dead to God.

Paul describes this in Ephesians 4:18-19: *"They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."* Our hearts of stone are dead and produce the fruit of death in our lives – all kinds of sin that comes from turning away from God.

Earlier on in Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul writes: *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."*

Paul says, because of our hard hearts we were darkened in our understanding, alienated from the life of God, ignorant, callous, greedy to practice impurity, dead to God, disobedient, living in fleshly passions, and children of wrath. Things were not ok between us and God. Our hearts of stone had destroyed everything and

cut us off from him. Rather than enjoying God and living in his eternal joy and blessing, we were cursed, cut off, and dead to him. We earned his righteous judgment.

So we have two stones (Picture) – a tomb stone and a heart stone – and both are a monumental problem and as long as they remain in place, it means mean death, judgment, and hopelessness.

But the reason we're here today is to celebrate the removal of the first stone! We read in Matthew 28:1-6: *“Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”*

The women looked inside the tomb and it was empty – no dead body. Jesus had risen from the dead and that stone was removed! Later on that day he appeared to Mary and then two of his disciples as they were walking home and then all the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem wondering what was going on. Jesus was alive! He rose from the dead, just like he said he would. And that meant he wasn't a liar; he wasn't a fake. He was the real thing – the Son of God who came to earth to live a perfect life on our behalf, to die on the cross to pay the penalty for sin, and rise again to give life to all who put their faith in him! The first stone was rolled away forever as Jesus conquered death and rose triumphantly from the grave.

But what about the second? What about our hearts of stone? The removal of the first stone happened 2,000 years ago, but the removal of the second is something we must think about today. Has the stone in your heart been removed?

There was a promise given by the prophet Ezekiel hundreds of years before Jesus came, about amazing things God would do through him. It says in Ezekiel 36:24-28: *“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse*

you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

These promises were first given to the people of Israel, to be received through Jesus their Messiah, and many experienced these blessings as they put their faith in Jesus and followed him. But many did not. Many rejected him and their hearts of stone remained.

But those promises weren't limited to only the Jews. God, in his mercy has opened the door to anyone who is lost in sin – anyone who's born with a heart of stone, including you and me. He promises to gather us to himself, to adopt us into his family, to purify us from all our sins, to give us a new heart of flesh and put his Spirit within us so that we walk in his ways and enter his eternal kingdom. All these incredible blessings are offered to us as a gift, to be received through faith in Jesus Christ.

After describing how dead we were in our sins, Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

The first stone was removed to open the door for us to receive all these things and now the question for each of us to ask ourselves is: Has the second stone been removed? Has the stone been removed from your heart? Have you put your faith in Jesus and decided to follow him? To turn from your own path of sin, and give your life to him?

We celebrate the removal of the first stone today, but the second must also be removed in order for you to truly celebrate. And so, I ask you to put your faith in Jesus. Let this Resurrection Sunday be the start of your own new life in him.