We tell these stories, not because they happened once, but because they are always happening. We tell these stories because we see ourselves in them, and the stories, then, give us hope for where we will end up, for how our own stories will end.

In this particular story from St. Mark, I find myself today with the women approaching the tomb. Jesus died on a Friday, in the afternoon. People in that culture reckoned that the day begins at dusk; that means the next day—Saturday, Sabbath day—began shortly thereafter. No work can be on the Sabbath day, which, in this case, meant these women couldn’t go out and attend to the body as they customarily would. So, as soon as they had light to see by on Sunday morning—which is to say, as soon as humanly possible—they got their things together and went to the tomb to prepare Jesus’ body for burial.

Did you notice how, even on the way there, they didn’t have a plan for actually getting in the tomb? They didn’t know how they were going to get through that big rock that had been rolled in front. “Who will roll away the stone for us?” they ask. This is not a small detail. If the stone can’t be rolled away, there’s really no point in showing up; but they did show up.

This story shows not only the hurry with which they set out to care for Jesus, but also their determination. “Yes, there’s a stone, but damn the stone, we’ll figure it out when we get there.” These three women had a job to do. Nobody else was going to do it for them. They didn’t have a plan for how to do it, but they went to do it all the same, because if they didn’t, who would? They set out that morning in hope that a solution would present itself, and with faith that, one way or another, they would complete their task.

That’s where I am today. I am standing before a great stone, one that I cannot move on my own. I am unsure who will move it for me, but I come here hoping, trusting that it *will* be moved and that I *will* be able to do the thing that I have come here to do: to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen.

What is the stone? The stone is lots of things. The stone is the pandemic that for a second year in a row is keeping us out of our church building while it is unsafe to gather for worship. It is a giant, invisible boulder sitting in front of the doors to our gathering space preventing us from entering, preventing us from sharing the joy of Easter, the laughter and the camaraderie of friendship; preventing us from consoling one another in our grief as friends and family members die; preventing us from looking upon the reality that we are not just a bunch of individuals holed up in our houses, but a community—a living, breathing, working, serving, loving community—that is feeling the strain of not being able to see and feel one another.

The stone is division. It’s political polarization and racial tension and all the other stuff that keeps us from loving our neighbors. It’s the unkind thoughts that cross my mind about my siblings in Christ when I listen to the news, or the anger and the frustration that I feel when I hear stories of injustices suffered or committed. It’s the number of times I’ve said to myself, “I just can’t understand those people, how they could think like that,” or “how they could believe that.”

The stone is stress. It’s how hard I’ve been working this past year to try to keep things going, to try to help us feel connected, to try to make it feel like we are still together even when we can’t see or hear each other. It’s the amount of work that goes into recording and editing and coordinating and trying to maintain a connection with everybody, work that I gladly and willingly do but that is so much harder to find worthwhile when I can’t even be with the people for whom I am doing it.

The stone is grief. It is the loss of what I once called normal, the absence of my friends, the inability to go out to dinner with my wife or even enjoy a beer at the brewery. It is the heaviness of the half-million dead in this country alone, the pit in my gut for all those who are more susceptible to this virus for the same reasons they are more susceptible to violence or hunger or hatred: because of where they live or how little they have or what color their skin is.

In short, dear friends, the stone is death. The stone is, as the prophet Isaiah says, the shroud that is cast over all peoples. See? We tell the story not because it happened once, but because it is always happening. We have different images for describing it, different words for telling it, but it is the same thing, the same story, the same problem.

I don’t have to tell you about these things, because you know them, too. Life is hard, things are tough, now more than most years. But that stone is especially heavy for me this week. That shroud is especially inky and black. This week, I lost one of my oldest friends to depression. And now, I have to stand here and tell you that everything is going to be peachy keen, a-okay, because Christ is risen. That is why I am wondering today: who will roll away this stone for me? How am I going to be able to make that sound true, to myself or anyone else?

I share this with you, my dear friends, not because my story is so much harder or sadder than yours, but because I know *your stories are just as hard*, just as sad, just as rotten. I share this story with you not because it happened this once, to me, but because I know it is always happening to all of us. We all have losses and stresses and struggles weighing us down. I don’t know what you’re going through, but I know you’re going through it because we all are. Each and every one of us, at some point in our lives looks up and wonders who is going to roll away this. damned. stone.

But, in spite of the stone, I am here. I have a job to do. We all do. Our job is to show up here today and to sing our hymns and shout into the darkness and to somehow—*somehow*—convince ourselves and one another that this good news is for us. And so, dear friends, I ask you: WHO will roll away this stone for us? How are we going to be able to do what we have gathered this morning to do?

We tell these stories, dear friends, not because they happened once, but *because they are always happening*. Today we have a giant stone staring us in the face as we walk toward that tomb. We can see the stone, we can see the shroud, but it is what we *can’t* see that is the crux of this story. The women in the story, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome, they could see the stone, whether ahead of them on the path or in their minds or in their hearts. But what they *couldn’t* see… well, that is where it gets interesting.

It wasn’t until they got closer that they could see that the stone was rolled off to the side a bit, that there was a way into the tomb after all. It wasn’t until they got up and inside that tomb that they saw the guy in the robe. It was that stranger who had to point out to them the thing they didn’t see: “LOOK” he said, “The man you’re looking for—Jesus, the Crucified One—he’s not here. LOOK - that’s the place where they laid him.” And when they looked, what did they see? Nothing.

I can’t see how *anyone* is going to move this stone. I know I can’t do it with my words, and I know I can’t do it by the force of my will, and I know I can’t do it by trying or praying or wishing or hoping hard enough. I know that I am not going to save this world, or this country, or this congregation, or myself because I know that I can’t even save the last slice of pizza. I know *I* can’t do it, and I know *you* can’t do it, and I know that *we* can’t all do it together even if we put our backs into it. The stone is just too big for us to handle. But then, I also know that we’re not the ones who're going to move it.

We tell these stories, not because they happened once, but because they are always happening. The power of God is not about moving one rock or raising one man from the dead. The promise of Easter—the promise of God, of resurrection—is that even when we can’t see a way around these heavy things, God does. Friends, I’m looking for a way to move this stone, and I’m not seeing anything. I’m looking for a way to spin all the violence and hate and evil in the world in a way that says that things are looking up, but I’m not seeing anything. I’m looking for a way out—or maybe a way in—and I’m not seeing anything. But you know what? That’s okay, because sometimes we have to show up before we can see those things. Sometimes, the only thing we can do is to stumble out of bed, gather the anointing spices and hope for the best.

I’m really glad it’s the story from Mark’s gospel this year. In Mark’s telling, Mary and Mary and Salome didn’t leave singing and dancing; they left in fear and confusion, running for their lives. Sometimes that is how we come out of Easter morning. The Resurrection doesn’t solve all our problems or leave us feeling happy and contented, but it does give us hope that maybe our fears and despairs and hurts are not the end of the story. Easter gives us hope that the stone can be rolled away, after all.

So I don’t have any answers for you. I don’t have some meme-able quote you can share that will take away all the pain, or the frustration, or the anger. All I’ve got is my jar of spices, and this sermon, and some hope that what I said is true: that we don’t tell these stories because they happened once, but because they are always happening. I’ve seen God bring death from life before: not just with Jesus, but all over. I’ve seen a pandemic paradoxically breath new life into a stagnant Church. I’ve seen myself and others grow from our worst pain. I’ve seen God roll away other stones, raise other corpses. So I showed up here today trusting, hoping, waiting to see it again.