

The Other Side of the Stone



Gary Wilkerson June 20, 2011

Joseph took the body...and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away" (Matthew 27:59–60).

Jesus had just been crucified and was now laid in a tomb. As a massive stone was rolled to seal the doorway, everyone had a sad sense of finality.

Scripture says a group of women, including Mary Magdalene, was sitting opposite the tomb. Those women must have been heartbroken. I can almost hear the despair in their voices: "What will happen now that Jesus is gone? How do we go on?"

Today we know the end of the story. We know that when Jesus said from the cross, "It is finished," he had conquered sin. We know that with his resurrection he had conquered death. And we know that he did it all for us.

But what if we didn't know the end of the story, like those women at the tomb? What were the eleven disciples thinking as they hid at a distance behind locked doors (see John 20:19)?

I don't think we can fathom what Jesus' death meant to his passionate followers. They had believed their Master was the hope of the world, the salvation of Israel, the light to the Gentiles. He was the great healer, raising the dead and setting captives free, preaching the good news to the poor. He was the embodiment of the new kingdom he preached about.

As they thought back to his words, "It is finished," they must have thought he meant, "It's over. I did everything I could, but I couldn't make it happen. This is the end of the story."

All too often, as Christians endure the trials of life, this is the message they believe. They see no hope beyond their difficult situation. All they can see is a stone permanently rolled into place separating them from hope.

Yet they're seeing things from *this side of the stone*. Like the women at the tomb or the dejected disciples, all they can see before them is defeat. Their hope has died — end of story.

If only they knew what God is at work doing for them on the other side of the stone.

Without knowing what's happening on the other side of the stone, our lives can be filled with trauma and fear.

On this side of the stone, homes are foreclosed and lost. Finances turn sour. Marriages fall apart. Without the hope of the Resurrection — without knowing Christ's victory for us — our trials can seem like the end of our story.

Maybe life has presented you with a hard, impassable situation. As you read this do you wonder, "Is God at work in my circumstance? Is Jesus really triumphant—*in me*? Can he really save me from this situation? Can he actually bring healing? I just don't see a way forward."

Like the disciples, some Christians ask these questions from behind "locked doors." They've shut God out

emotionally, no longer able to pour out their hearts before him. They want so much to be giving, loving servants, but they feel emptied of all hope.

That's the view on *this side of the stone*.

I believe there was another figure at this scene who couldn't see past to the other side of the stone.

Where do you think Satan was during this three-day period of Christ's death, burial and resurrection? Remember, the devil is not omnipresent. Only God is everywhere at all times. Satan's demons may be stationed all over the world, spewing venom, but the enemy himself is not. He can only be in one place.

So, where was he during the Crucifixion? There's no way we can know the answer to that biblically, so we can only imagine it. Personally, I believe Satan was present at the cross. I imagine him rejoicing over every aspect of Jesus' suffering — every stripe from the whip, every blow from a soldier's fist, every strike of the hammer driving nails into his hands and feet.

These would be Jesus' last hours — and I imagine Satan gleefully starting the countdown: "This is it — it's the end for Jesus. I have triumphed over the Son of God! Darkness will now reign over all. Jesus, if you would have just bowed down before me, we would have ruled together over every dominion of the world. But this is what happens when you don't choose me. You lose — and I win!"

I then picture Satan at the tomb, watching the soldiers roll the stone into place, sealing the doorway. When that rock slams shut with a thud, I imagine the devil letting out a whoop of victory. He calls out to his fellow demons, "It's time to celebrate. We've won! We're going to throw a party like the world has never seen."

As I picture Satan declaring victory, a powerful shaking begins.

Suddenly, when things look bleakest, a rattling begins. The ground starts to rumble and shake. I picture Satan stopping in mid-sentence to watch the giant, immovable stone now rolling back and forth. Finally, the shaking causes the stone to roll away completely — and the demons tremble.

They see a blinding light beaming outward from the tomb. They can make out a body—resurrected, illuminated, whole—standing in the entrance. Then a voice comes from that light-filled doorway: "Satan, you bit my foot. But I'm about to step on your head."

Here is the word our Lord has given us for our tormentor: "The party's over, devil. You have been defeated. The smell of death you brought is now gone. I claim this ground for my victory."

Perhaps as you read this, you think, "I need Jesus to appear in my situation, to see him step on Satan's head for me. If he isn't at work for me on the other side of that stone, it's all over."

You see, on this side of the stone we can feel there's no hope, no future for us. But do you believe something is happening on the other side? Do you hear a faint rumbling? Can you sense a shaking under your feet?

I'm speaking figuratively, of course — but do you discern signs that Jesus is on the move for you? There may be only a tiny crack of light in that huge stone. But that's all you need. At some point, in his own glorious timing, Jesus will step through that doorway into the scene of your life — and your trial will be changed in an instant.

I want to tell you three stories that remind us our Lord is at work for us on the other side of the stone.

1. Love Letter to a Failure

I have a friend named Eric who had a very hard childhood. His father told him over and over, "You're a failure, you're no good. You'll never amount to anything."

As Eric grew older he turned to drugs, and as he put it, "I became a terrible addict. First, I was terrible in the intensity of the drugs. I mixed together all kinds of things that could have killed me. But I was also terrible at *being* a drug addict. My needle would break, or I would be short of cash to feed my habit. I felt like a failure even as a drug addict."

Eric's life became a complete mess. His addiction drained him of every penny. One night he decided to rob a convenience store to buy more drugs — but he even failed at that. He pulled out a gun and shouted, "Everybody, up against the wall!" But the store was so crowded the people couldn't all fit against the wall. Confused, Eric ran away.

He eventually decided to end his life. So he took the shotgun from the robbery intending to shoot himself. But he dropped the gun and it fired, wounding him in the side instead. As Eric drove to the hospital he thought, "I'm such a miserable failure I can't even kill myself."

After being treated, Eric walked the streets in total despair. Deep down he'd been mad at God for making him a lifelong failure. Finally, Eric cried out to the God he had never cared about, asking, "Are you there at all? Is there any reason for me to live?"

Eric heard a voice say to him, "I'm sending you a love letter." Somehow he knew it was the voice of Jesus.

As Eric sat down on a curb, rainwater trickled along the gutter under him. He noticed a small booklet floating toward him, and Eric picked it up. It was a tract with the title, "There Is Hope for the Drug Addicted."

The tract was published by a group called Victory Outreach. Eric looked up the ministry's address, went there and gave his life to Jesus. Soon he was delivered from his addiction. He gave up every habit — including his belief that he was destined to be a failure. Jesus made Eric a new creature in every way.

This young man had thought his life was over — but it had just begun. He couldn't see the life — resurrection life — that Jesus had been planning for him all along, on the other side of the stone.

A year or so later, Eric approached me with a question: "Do you have any job openings for a young minister who's been healed, set free and is on fire for God?" We did — and I had the privilege of seeing God's power work through Eric again and again in our ministry. He testified over and over, "Jesus sent me a love letter. And he's sending one to you now."

Think of all the love letters Jesus is writing right now on the other side of the stone.

2. Repairing the Irreparable

A couple I know had been married for more than a decade when the wife left the husband for a second time. This couple wasn't the kind that constantly argued or nagged or even disagreed about much. The trouble was a worldly tug in the wife's heart. She was powerfully attracted to the party scene, and she left her husband to dive back into it.

The same thing had happened years before. At that time she had left him and began sleeping with other men. Now that nightmare scenario was repeating itself as she abandoned him a second time. Yet once again she wanted to come back to him.

This man was devastated. He told me, "When she did this the first time, it broke my heart. The pain was more than I could bear. I didn't know if I could ever love her again. I took her back and we struggled, but we got through it.

"Now there's no way. I know I can't love her again after this. I'm beyond pain — I don't feel anything. Besides, how could I trust her ever? How could we have a future when she's proved she'll do this again and again?"

Nobody who knew this couple thought their marriage could survive. Many counseled him to divorce her and move on with his life. Yet even then the husband sensed God was working on the other side of the stone. The Lord whispered to his heart, "If you will love her the way I love you, your marriage will be restored."

The husband resisted. It was painful for him even to hope again. It was even more painful to try to trust. But God delivered on his promise. Today that couple is back together. They're in church, worshiping and praising God together. They've been reconciled and healed, loving each other deeply.

Their marriage is a testimony to God's ability to restore what seems beyond repair. Even the most damaged, broken relationship isn't beyond the reach of his resurrection power. This marriage required life from beyond the

tomb — and that's exactly where Jesus was working for them: on the other side of the stone.

3. Conqueror of All Evil

Just a few weeks ago, while sitting on a park bench, I met a tattooed teenager named Ricky who eagerly told me his story. He was from inner-city Chicago, and his father had left the family when Ricky was still a baby.

Ricky's mother remarried, and the man who became his stepfather abused Ricky physically and sexually. One night, as the man began beating Ricky's mother, the boy tried to intervene. Ricky's stepfather beat him horribly. The boy ended up on the kitchen floor a bloody mess.

After that, Ricky began cutting himself. At that point in his story he paused to roll up his sleeve to show me dozens of scars running up and down his arm.

He continued, "Then three months ago I was in the park with a friend. He looked different, and I asked him what had happened to him. He said, 'I met a man named Jesus who set me free from all my sin. He's cleaned me and healed me. Ricky, I want you to know the Jesus I met.'" That day, Ricky gave his life to the Lord.

Ricky then rolled up his other sleeve. He showed me an inscription on his arm and said, "The day I met Jesus, I had this tattoo put on." It read: "*I will give you thanks, for you have answered me. You have become my salvation.*"

Ricky had been lost to this world, literally beaten down by it. But Jesus spoke to him from the other side of the stone: "My love conquers all evil."

Today Ricky knows not only the joy of resurrection life. He also knows the freedom that comes with being forgiven...and forgiving.

A story is still being written.

I'm not advocating tattoos. But I believe Ricky's tattoo represents a truth about every believer. It is this: *Jesus is still writing our lives*. He is the author and finisher of our faith — and he isn't finished with any of us yet.

You may be besieged by the greatest trial of your life right now. But the risen Christ is on the move on your behalf, on the other side of the stone. He is writing *his* story into your situation — a story of resurrection life, bursting forth onto a scene once ruled by death.

Satan will try to deceive you into thinking it's all over, that the tomb is closed. But Jesus is telling you, "I have broken through. The devil didn't have the last word. Death no longer has its sting. Light has now conquered darkness. And my love has conquered all evil."

There he stands in the doorway: your hope, your salvation, your healing. Christ's victory has overcome all of your failures. His power can set you free from addiction. His healing can restore your broken relationship. And his love has conquered every evil that has tried to beat you down. No darkness can stop him.

So, is there a stone standing between you and God's deliverance right now? I tell you, God is on the move in your life at this very moment. (He is never *not* at work!) The stone is being rolled away. Light is breaking forth. And there stands your hope in the doorway: Jesus. He has triumphed over all the powers of darkness — and his victory is yours by faith.

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