

“The Strength to Move Stones” – All Saints 2015
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I confess to you, and those of you who have read my blog already know this: I'm terrible at trivia. Just terrible.

There are really only three trivia questions I have a prayer of answering with any accuracy:

1) What time is it? (This one only with the caveat that I can look at my watch or phone – AND provided my watch or phone have self-adjusted for daylight savings time)

2) What's the best TV show in the history of network television? (Obvious answer: McGuyver)

3) What is the shortest verse in the Bible?

As a young pastor's kid, I took advantage of this tremendous tidbit of trivia when I was attending Sunday School at our small church in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. One week my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Thompson, gave us an assignment to memorize our favorite Bible verse and then recite it to the class the following Sunday.

A week later, Mrs. Thompson called on me: "Ned, please stand and recite your favorite verse of the Bible."

I stood, and – taking a cue from a televangelist I'd seen – pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and mopped my brow. Then, with great affect, I offered: "John 11: 35. Jesus wept."

I fell back into my seat in a fit of giggles.

Mrs. Thompson rolled her eyes and muttered something like, "He's weeping right now, that's for sure."

I may have taken it lightly back then, but today I recognize how this short verse reveals a vulnerable man impacted by a devastating experience. Jesus wept. Jesus loses a friend. Grief overwhelms him.

Jesus wept. How completely human of him. In this brief verse, Jesus becomes relatable. The comforter requires comfort.

Perhaps this verse, short though it may be, is helpful as we consider an oddity within this passage. This story tells us Jesus holds the divine – the *Godly* – power to bring someone from death back to life – he holds unfathomable authority. So, why does he have to ask for *help* to roll a stone away from the tomb? Jesus has the strength to bring a friend back from the finality of death, but has to ask for help to move the heavy stone.

Moving heavy stones, too big to roll on our own. Well, that's what grief feels like, doesn't it?

In his weeping – in the moment he is overcome – perhaps we recognize this debilitating power of grief. Or... maybe it's guilt: that moment we've all had when we say, "I should have done something more. I could have done something more." Maybe it's resentment – frustration with people who expect him to *just do something*. Facing the loss of a loved one, any of these is unbearable. Under it all we can lose the strength – the will – just to get out of bed, let alone muster the fortitude to move heavy stones.

Death is a reality. This story tells us that death was something Jesus, himself, just couldn't *live* with. So, how do we?

Too often the heavy stones of silence stand fortified before us when it comes to conversations about death and dying. And yet we commit to following the way of Jesus Christ who tells us that death will not have the final word.

I don't know what happens after death. If you want an answer to that trivia question, you'll have to look elsewhere. But I do know that our fear and anxiety and sadness about death are the very stones that often stand at the tomb preventing us from talking about what's inside of it. And sometimes that's the only thing we need: the space to talk about it, so that we can enter the tomb and just poke around a bit.

I don't know what it feels like to die. I do know what it feels like to be lying in the back of an ambulance covered in my own blood begging a paramedic through rasping breaths to just hold my hand because if I died, I didn't want to die alone. And in the days that followed I just wanted to talk about that; I just wanted to talk about how scary it was; I just wanted to express my fear; I just wanted to talk about mortality because I'd caught this glimpse of finitude.

“But that's morbid,” we say.

“Just be happy you're alive,” we say.

“God must have something GREAT in store for you,” we say.

In those days following that accident I just wanted space to acknowledge that I won't live forever; to honor the shock I was feeling, to roll the stone of silence away from the tomb and normalize it a little – get comfortable with it.

Often, however, the heavy stones standing between us and conversations about death and dying are built of cultural taboo; they're mortared together with the complexity of despair.

If we want to move them, if we want to have the conversation, if we want to open up the tomb and explore it – if only to make the inevitability more comfortable – then maybe we follow Jesus' example and ask for help. And, dear God, that's ok.

An organization called the Conversation Project in Boston conducted a survey and found 90% of the general population believes it's important to talk about death, and yet only 30% actually engage in conversations about it. Keeping in mind that 100% of us actually face it...

Sometimes we, ourselves, are called upon to move the stones. Despite our own panic at the prospect, we thrust a shoulder against the massive boulder and shove with all our might. Other times we accidentally knock the stones away, tripping over our own wisdom with spastic serendipity, and simply listen when someone is ready to talk – to express their own feelings openly, candidly, gently in a sacred space we've created without knowing we've nudged a stone away at all.

A month ago I posted the following words to facebook:

Our heels absolutely clobbered the pavement.
The balls of our feet bouncing as we ran hard
to catch the sunset over the sound,
trampling once more over so many milestones.
People gawked. They pointed.
We weren't dressed for a jog.
You in your sweater and button down,
and me in a flannel and jeans.
One couple thought we were the Emerald City's
Bonny and Clyde dashing from 7-11.
Another thought we were a Montague and Capulet
setting off to escape our fate.
But the sun was setting.
Its own milestone, a mineral falling from the cosmic quarry,
and we raced against our own orbit because
we gave each other strength to run still faster.
The streets moved, the signposts dodged, the cars veered,
because we willed it in delight...
Our wildly waving arms probably helped, too.
Two girls on the footbridge pointed toward the islands
and directed our frenetic footfalls to a knoll
where the sun offered one more parting gesture
as it caressed the heavens goodnight.
The momentary distraction of a giant's head made you ask:

“What if there’s a body attached to that head beneath the earth?”
Maybe, just maybe, if we’d missed the sun’s solitary whispers,
the statue’s arms would have dug themselves out
and lifted us up for one last peek.
But it doesn’t matter,
because it will set again
and we’ll run to see it.
Look, there it goes.
Let’s rest our legs here for a while...
and watch it again tomorrow.

My dad called a few days later to say that he’d seen these words. Well, he’d seen them on my mom’s facebook page, since he doesn’t even have an email account! He wanted to express his deep resonance with them. For him, it was a description for how he and my mom were moving toward the end of life. He explained that these words carried a certain truth, which comes after you’ve lived a full and loving life with a true companion.

I didn’t say anything.

Just listening – just having the opportunity to hear him talk about death with no fear, only respect and reverence, was a gift that I’ll always have, tucked away in the pocket of my heart.

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When I was 18 I planned my own memorial service. I was leaving for my stint as a short-term missionary to the Dominican Republic, and I didn’t want my parents to have to deal with the details should something happen to me. At that age I wasn’t yet encumbered by the stigma conversations about death carry. So, I sat down with a family friend and we sketched out what the service would include. When we were finished, he held me in a long hug and whispered, “When you get back, I’m tearing this up,” and crinkled his service notes in my ear.

A short time later, while I was bed-ridden for two months with a parasitic infection while living in the Dominican, he called me and crinkled the same paper in the receiver of the telephone. “Now Ned, don’t make me use this...”

After my missionary stint, I returned home, and he took me out for coffee. “I just want you to know that I tore it up,” he told me, “now that you’re back safe and sound.”

I wish he’d kept it because I would have loved to see what we’d planned.

I can only remember one piece of the service. For the postlude I’d requested *Ode to Joy*.

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Almost twenty years to the day later, while on pilgrimage through Israel, I found myself in a cave where tradition tells us Jesus had the stone rolled away and then called Lazarus out from the tomb.

As we stood in a dark echoing chamber in the chapel, we were asked by one of the leaders to turn in our pilgrim songbooks to Psalm 127. The leader said, "As we pause in this moment, we remember Jesus raised a friend whom he loved. We also note the special nature of this Psalm, which was written by Ken for his son Ned on March 22, 2006 - the day before his thirtieth birthday."

I had no idea it was coming.

Note the context. We sang in a place where death was recognized as both finite reality and infinite mystery.

We stood within a crypt – a tomb – where a stone had rolled away.

We sang a song written for the first birthday that followed an accident, which almost claimed my life (I was still in a sling at the time of its writing).

As we sang, the time surrounding the writing of this song all collapsed in on me: that desire I'd had to just talk about mortality, to find stability, to ask for help.

Slowly, as we sang, something cracked open.

In my ability to talk about death, I found new life.

It was its own resurrection, of sorts.

Jesus, who couldn't bare to lose his friend, called from the opening of the tomb, "Lazarus, come out!"

And with this Psalm, written just months after my body and my spirit were broken, my dad stood in that same place literally and metaphorically and cried, "Ned, come out!"

As we sang I realized Psalm 127 was set to a tune I recognized.

"Joyful are our homes with children,
each one family, each one friend.
They are symbols of your kinship,
signs of life that has no end."

Ode to Joy.

I can say with honesty that I live with the peculiarity and mystery of death's counterpart, resurrection, on a daily basis. Cherished memories keep the Saints watching over us. On this All Saints day, I know that I will never stand in that spot again and sing "Bring us Home" without thinking about Hal Newsom sitting behind me. Elizabeth Patrick's collection of May Sarton poetry is now interspersed in my prayer life. And even these years later, whenever I post to facebook, I wonder, "WWJD?" – What would Jerry do? Jerry Bottomly, who only used social media to spread compassion, hope, and love.

These are the saints that surround us, and it's ok to remove the stones and to call out their memories, so that we can bask in the warmth they've created.

Eventually, if we manage to gain any comfort or perspective about this difficult subject matter, we'll get to the end of this story and recognize it ends in a different way than we expect.

Jesus says, "Loosen his bonds, and let him go."

Let him go. Those departing words are often the heaviest stones to take away. But if we prepare ourselves through communication and dialogue, perhaps we'll learn there's no need to be silent after all.

What happens when we're willing to open up and talk about death? Well, my guess is, life will never be the same.

With these thoughts, I invite you to return to Lazarus' tomb with me, to open up new occasions to have difficult conversations, and to recognize this time we share as an opportunity to open ourselves to mystery, to be vulnerable, and to meet one another in that in peace, and love, and joy...

Perhaps together, we'll find the strength to move stones.