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**The Stone Rolled Back**

Matthew 28:2

This year marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. This translation has had a huge impact on our language, literature, and culture over the past four centuries. The poetry of its language is so beautiful and compelling that for many people it came to represent the voice of God. While the success of this translation was truly phenomenal, it failed to accomplish the chief purpose that King James I of England had in mind when he commissioned it in 1603.

Historians tell us that James pressed for a new translation of the Bible because he was afraid of social change. The most popular English translation of the Bible in 1603 was the Geneva Bible. It was produced by English refugees in Geneva, Switzerland during the late 1550s. These refugees were listening to the lectures of John Calvin and the sermons of the Scottish reformer John Knox who was their pastor. While they worked to produce an accurate rendering of scripture in English they also wanted to help people understand the theological significance of what they were reading. So they included notes in the margins. These notes were influenced by the teaching of Calvin which challenged the scriptural basis for bishops and the writings of John Knox which questioned the divine right of Kings.

James recognized that the popularity of the Geneva Bible at the beginning of his reign was a threat to a king who expected to have absolute power over the people and the church. He wanted a new Bible without these seditious notes in the margins and a translation that would be more positive about the leadership role of bishops and kings.

When the new translation was published in 1611 James got what he wanted. Eventually the King James version replaced the Geneva Bible in the hearts and minds of the people. But his master plan that this translation would be a bullwork against social change failed miserably. Ordinary people were empowered by their encounter with the gospel through the King James Bible. They accurately saw that the gospel wasn't about defending the divine right of kings or protecting the status quo. The gospel is about God's transforming power unleashed in our world. The rebellions against James I's son by Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century formed the prelude to another revolution in the next century. The new American republic loved its King James Bible but had no use for kings. This was the future King James most wanted to prevent.

This is the truth that is emphasized in the presentation of the resurrection in the Gospel of Matthew. There we see a conspiracy between Jewish authorities and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to maintain the status quo. Matthew describes the chief priests and Pharisees approaching Pilate to make common cause to crush the movement that Jesus had started. The Jewish authorities are convinced that Jesus' execution was necessary because he had been stirring up dangerous ideas in the minds of the people. Jesus helped his listeners imagine a God who seeks to transform the world in which we live. The Jewish officials see this as the kind of false hope that will eventually lead the people into rebellion against the Romans. While they, too, would like to see the Romans thrown out,

they are convinced that open rebellion would have disastrous consequences. The result would be a bloodbath which would make their own positions even more precarious.

Motivated by their own fear they tell Pilate that he has reason to be afraid, too. They tell the governor of Jesus' promise that he would be raised from death in three days. They are afraid that Jesus' followers may steal the body and then tell people that he was indeed raised from death. If that should happen then Jesus' death would not have accomplished their stated purpose of keeping the peace and preventing a bloodbath. They call on Pilate to join with them in protecting the status quo by securing the tomb. While they disagree with the Roman governor on many issues, when it comes to Jesus they are of like mind. They have all placed their bets on the world as it is. This is the world they have mastered; the world of political power and military might. This world runs on money and privilege and cares little for the needs of ordinary people.

Pilate does not require much convincing. As a man who lives by fear he "gets it." He gives the order to make the tomb "as secure as you can (Matthew 27:65)." But there is irony in Pilate's words. Pilate has learned that there are some things money cannot buy and there are some problems military superiority cannot solve. Pilate suggests to the Jewish authorities that their solution may not work. His words also serve as a reminder to them of their vulnerability before God. How does one make a tomb secure from a miracle of God? How does one keep the sun from rising in the East? A huge stone and a well armed detachment of soldiers is the best security system available. But Pilate understands that it may not be enough to preserve the status quo.

The next morning the two Marys arrive at Jesus' burial place to see the result of the authorities' efforts to secure the tomb. Matthew tells us that neither the heavily armed guards nor the massive stone were equal to the transformative power of God. The earth moved, an angel arrived, and the well trained guards were neutralized. They were rendered helpless by their fear. Pilate was right to have been tentative about the adequacy of the security system.

The stone rolled back changes everything. That stone was meant to be a sign of the tragic end of every human life. John Updike makes this point in poetic form:

The stone is rolled back, not paper maché,  
not a stone in a story,  
but the vast rock of materiality  
that in the slow grinding of time  
will eclipse for each of us  
the wide light of day.

The stone was put in place to signify the end of Jesus' ministry and the victory of the status quo. It was supposed to represent the snuffing out of the grace that Jesus proclaimed. But now that it is rolled back it has become a sign of God's transformative power unleashed in the world. God raised Jesus to proclaim the truth that Pilate feared most. There is no earthly power which can keep the gospel from changing the lives of ordinary people.

The stone rolled back challenges each of us to give up our struggle to hold onto the status quo of our lives. The gospel of the resurrected Christ has already begun its transforming work in us.