

Message: “Overwhelmed”

Steve shares his story. “That Friday started like any other. Over the past few months, I’d developed a routine. I’d stay in my room as long as possible. When I gathered up enough energy, I’d look for jobs. There were none. Then I’d sit for hours, staring at nothing, consumed by anxiety. Most days, that’s as far as I got. Walking to the mailbox took all my energy when I could force myself to do it. The yard went unmowed. I rarely took out the trash.

The fog of depression began the year before. When the economy failed, so did my business, taking with it every penny I had. Then my wife filed for divorce. It was a long time coming, but I was still devastated. It was like a multicar pileup on the highway. In just a few weeks, I’d gone from a respected, married professional to an unemployed divorcé, drifting along without direction or purpose.

Now, I’d reached rock bottom. I couldn’t find work. I was hopeless, and down on myself. I felt like God was teaching me a harsh lesson for every mistake I made, showing how I could’ve been a better spouse, better at business, a better person.

How could God possibly love a person like me? Sometimes the cruel thoughts became so overpowering, I’d consider the ways I could leave this earth and, maybe, kill the pain. Sleep had become the best escape from my torment, and it didn’t come often. However, that Friday, I was exhausted. I lay down in bed and closed my eyes. Unusually peaceful, with no tossing or turning, I drifted off.

What happened next wasn’t a dream. I was in an unearthly but calming place. I found myself in someone’s arms. They were seated on a big rock, holding me as if I was a child. There was no verbal exchange. None was necessary. We were completely at peace together. They rocked me gently. I’d never felt so content.

“Finally, some rest,” Steve thought. It felt so good not to be sad. Then there was an abrupt but calming revelation.

“It’s Jesus. This is Jesus.”

There was no time, space or dimension to this place. My focus shifted as Jesus reached down and picked up a large, flat object. I recognized it as a piece of slate, one you could write on with chalk. Jesus made a slow, smooth, purposeful motion across it, as if he were wiping it clean. Still, no words, just complete tranquility. I understood.

A clean slate. Forgiven.

All the cruel thoughts I had about myself. All the shame I felt over my business failures, the debts still to be paid. All my shortcomings that led to the failure of my marriage. None of it made me less redeemable in the eyes of God. I could leave the weight of the past behind and start anew. **I'd lost sight of this truth, but here it was, presented with utter clarity.**

Steve woke up. And while the image of Jesus faded, the feeling didn't. He was at peace, a peace he'd never experienced. It was as if something inside him - something cracked and broken - had been repaired.

Steve's circumstances didn't change overnight, but his outlook on life did. The depression eased. Over time, as he contemplated the experience, the boulder of shame was lifted from his shoulders. Steve reclaimed his identity and sense of purpose in life. He found a new path in his career and repaid his debts.

There is one, last part. Steve said, "It took me five years to tell anyone about what I experienced. It was so genuine and so authentic. I felt it might be diminished if I shared it. I didn't know how to find the words. They all seemed so inadequate. My story must be shared, even if I'm not completely able to describe what happened. Because it's a reminder God loves us unconditionally - even when we can't love ourselves."¹

Overwhelmed. Steve was weighed down by the stony fetters of life until he was startled in a good way with something outside of his experience, something outside his comfort zone, something which gave him new life, a fresh start, a changed perspective.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/this-mysterious-dream-brought-clarity-and-comforting-peace/>
modified and edited

Have you ever been overwhelmed? You may not have shared Steve's particular life experiences, but I'm sure you've experienced the same feelings he did. We all can feel overwhelmed by the unique situations and circumstances in our lives. In this way we're just like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome on that morning.

Overwhelmed. This was how the women who made their way to the tomb felt. They went to serve. They went because it was what people did. The rituals of death were known, automatic, unthinking. Which was good, because on that morning, they weren't capable of thinking, just moving, going through the motions.

They were like robots with a specific task - gathering the spices, the oils, the cloth, wrapping it all together, preparing for the early morning journey. Then they slept or didn't sleep. They may have stared at the walls all night, eyes burning with used up tears. They waited, numb.

They all rose together, with a common need to do something that made sense in a senseless time. And so, they set out, huddled together, but alone in their own pain and silence. They walked on legs they couldn't feel, burdened by a weight they couldn't have described if they had to.

Then out of the silence was a sudden gasp. "The stone," someone whispered. They stopped dead in their tracks. Their way was blocked. The tears barely held in check began to flow again.

"The stone." It blocked their way, their duty, their hope. They couldn't perform this last service for him. They couldn't take their last look at him, at the lifeless body of the one who had been more alive than any person they'd ever known or would ever know.

The stone. It blocked them, cut them off, stymied them. They almost turned back. But they started to move again toward the place of death. Uncertain, bowed, and almost broken, they walked on, wondering, "Who would roll away the stone?"

Who rolls away your stone? Those stones are everywhere it seems. Across every path, choking every road, cutting off our way home.

Maybe your stone is physical: an illness which changed your life, redefined you in ways you never imagined. Or a relationship which tears you down more than builds you up. Or violence or abuse of some sort.

Maybe your stone is mental: something that wears away your self-identity until you don't know who you are anymore. A job that's killing you, a lifestyle keeping you from what your heart really needs and wants. An addiction or bad habit you can't seem to stop.

Maybe your stone is social: a contempt for leaders who seem like schoolchildren locked in playground taunts and narcissistic bragging. Or the continual abuse of a planet of living creatures driven to extinction and destroyed beyond usefulness and beauty. Or a community defined more by our antagonisms than our commonality.

Maybe your stone is emotional: a grief you can't transform into hope, a sadness engulfing you, a numbness shrouding you in a shadow not of this world.

Maybe your stone is spiritual: questions which distract your attempts to pray, the emptiness of the rituals of worship, vacuous praise when your world is careening off course at an alarming rate.

Who will roll away the stone? They started to move again. Their question was huge, their need greater than their own strength, but they started to move again. They put one foot in front of another, headed straight for the stone as if it wasn't there. As if it wasn't going to stop them from performing their service. As if it wasn't going to keep them from the worship of their hands and hearts. They went on to the place of death and impenetrable stones, as if. And when they got there, Mark says, the stone was rolled away.

They were startled. This was unexpected. And in the place of death was a being of light and life, who told them this wasn't the place to find Jesus. He wasn't in a grave. He wasn't hanging around a cemetery. Jesus wasn't behind a stone too great for anyone to roll away. He's not here.

He's there. There, where you live. There, where you work. There, where you love and serve. Jesus is there beyond the stones, all of which will roll away by his power, the power of love and life.

Then Mark says an odd thing: they ran. In terror and amazement, they ran. And they said nothing. To anyone. What they experienced was too startling, unexpected and otherworldly, so they ran.

The end. Most scholars agree this is Mark's original ending. Silence, fear, and awe, running away. The early church didn't like this ending, so it gave us a more comfortable certainty in the verses that follow.

But why would Mark leave the story so unfinished? Because yours is unfinished, too. Think about it. Mark is telling the story to people who knew Jesus was alive, yet he says they told no one.

How did the word get past the stone of their fear? Jesus rolled away the stone. Even the stone of our inadequacy. Their silence wasn't the final word. God's hope was the final word.

We believe we've come looking for Jesus, but many of us are focused on the stones that get in the way. Sometimes we're fixated on what overwhelms us. Sometimes we have a poor image of Jesus himself. Sometimes our fears or limitations or hurts keep us from the true search for the living Christ.

But the message of Easter is that none of these stones, none of the distractions, none of these inadequacies are ultimate barriers to a resurrection encounter. We can trust the stone will be rolled away. And when it is, the Risen Christ will be there to welcome us. And yes, it will be startling and uncomfortable, but in a good way.

I don't know how your stone will be rolled away. I don't know what effort it will require, what struggle is before you. I don't know if it will roll away as if by magic in the twinkling of an eye, or if it will take a lifelong exertion on your part, chipping away at the rock until the hope shines through. I don't know if it will happen today or tomorrow or when you draw your last breath in this life. But I know, with every fiber of my being, the stone will roll away.

He is Risen. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray ...

Jesus, I confess my sins and ask for your forgiveness. Please come into my heart as my Lord and Savior. Take complete control of my life and help me to walk in your footsteps daily by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Lord, for saving me and for answering my prayer. Amen.

Mark 16:1-8 (CEB)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.