

The Most Rev. Ray R. Sutton

Easter Sunday 2021

In a philosophy class at university, the professor thought he'd start an argument. That's kind of what philosophers do. He asked the question, "Can God make a rock so big that He can't move it?" A quiet student raised his hand. He didn't talk much in class; John was blind. The professor called on John asking, "Can you resolve this conundrum for us?" Conundrum means a confusing or difficult question or problem. John responded, "No conundrum at all. Not every question is a valid question if it's based on the wrong premise; at least that's according to Aristotle's logic, which you've taught us." John continued, "The fact is that if God is really God, He can never do anything contrary to His nature. The answer to your question is, 'It's not that God couldn't; it's that, no, God wouldn't make a stone so big He couldn't move. He's so perfect, He's never going to go against His nature.'" Then John added, "Besides, concerning rocks, God might have His own question for us." "Yes, what's that?" the professor asked. John responded, "God might ask us, 'What are you going to do with the stone I already made in front of the empty tomb?'"

That question does meet us this Easter morning. It's the most famous stone in the history of the world. It's the one that was pushed in front of Jesus Christ's grave after His crucifixion. Somehow, three days later, it was rolled away. We actually know quite a bit about that stone. There's a back story to it.

After Christ died on Good Friday, St. Matthew tells us one of His closest disciples approached Pontius Pilate that day. His name was Joseph of Arimathea. He asked the governor if he could take Christ's body down and place it in his own tomb (Matthew 27:57ff.) We're told Joseph had a, "new tomb, carved out of stone." That is, it was cut into the solid rock of the hillside just outside of Jerusalem.

Pilate grants Joseph's request. He could have said no, but he said yes. Apparently, Joseph had that kind of influence with Pilate. He was a very wealthy man. Perhaps that's why he had direct access to such a powerful political leader, which we should not lose.

Upon receiving permission, Joseph proceeded to Golgotha where Christ's bleeding body still hung on the cross. By this time, Nicodemus and Mary, His Blessed Mother, joined Joseph. Together they lowered the body. St. Matthew tells us that Joseph personally wrapped Jesus' body in linen burial cloths. They placed Jesus' body in the tomb. Then St. Matthew records that after the group placed the Lord's body in the tomb, "a great stone was rolled to the door of the sepulcher" (v. 60). Notice the adjective, "great."

We have some idea just how great this stone was. Records from second temple Judaism around the time of Christ, tells us there were essentially two kinds of stones put in front of tombs. The most popular kind was actually a cylindrical stone cork with a raised edge on the top of it. The cylindrical part of the stone would be put into the opening. The raised edge would overlap the outside edge of the opening forming a kind of seal.

The other kind of stone placed in front of graves probably like Joseph's, was actually a large, circular stone disc. The whole stone covered the entire opening. Out of 900 graves, there were only 4 of these kinds of stones covering graves that seemed to have survived. Only famous, wealthy people are buried

in tombs with these kinds of stone. These are people of the stature of Joseph, again, the kind of man who could have direct access to a Roman governor.

These large disc-type stones were normally about 4 to 6 feet in height, weighing up to nearly 3,000 pounds. The enormous disc was put in a groove in front of the grave so that it could be rolled back and forth to close or open the tomb. The text alerts us that this was the kind of stone in front of Jesus' tomb. It says, "He rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher" (v. 60). The key word in this sentence is, "rolled." It's a Greek verb that means roll as in a child rolling marbles in a game. Also, the rock is described as a, "great stone." The other kind of cork-like burial stone doesn't fit this description. The text does say that "he," Joseph, moved the stone. Perhaps given the shape of the stone with grooves in front of the grave, a man by himself could have rolled it with the ruts positioned to guide and facilitate even such a heavy stone. Of course, we're also told in Scripture that the stone was sealed with the Roman insignia and Pilate's own guards were placed in front of it. Also plausible is that attention is called to Joseph moving the stone because it was after all, his tomb. He would have no doubt taken the lead with others possibly joining him to roll the stone in place. The fact that others are mentioned, therefore, doesn't necessarily mean they didn't assist him. After the great stone was rolled in front of Christ's tomb, Joseph and the others left.

Three days later on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and others returned to embalm Christ's body with myrrh and aloes. To their dismay, they found an empty tomb. Importantly, the massive stone mysteriously had been caused to roll away. An angel met them and explained that there had been an earthquake, providing an explanation as to why the stone had opened up the tomb of Jesus.

However, it is important for us to understand that the stone was not moved to let Jesus' out. There's no rock so big that God can't move it. Rather, the stone was rolled away so that those first disciples could see the tomb was empty. And that big stone played a large role in helping those disciples eventually to see the only explanation for the empty tomb. Jesus had been raised from the dead. Christ once said that if his disciples were silent, "He would make the stones cry out" (Luke 19:40). On Easter morning a stone cries out, "He is risen; He is risen indeed! Certainly, a stone cried out on that first Easter. It cries for us again now.

Today we're to see a massive stone rolled away, peer into the empty tomb, and believe the only plausible explanation. Christ is risen from the dead. We're to be reminded that there's no rock too big for the Resurrected Christ. And He moves other stones in our lives so that we'll see and believe that the Lord is risen today! Maybe we should trust the Living Christ with our so-called immovable rocks in our lives. As someone has said, "those who leave everything in God's hands, will see God's hand in everything." May we truly see through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's hand in everything. He lives! Amen!