The Stone of Discouragement

Pope Francis presided at the Easter Vigil on April 20, 2019, in the Vatican Basilica.

Following is the Vatican-provided translation of the homily of the Holy Father:

The women bring spices to the tomb, but they fear that their journey is in vain, since a large stone bars the entrance to the sepulchre. The journey of those women is also our own journey; it resembles the journey of salvation that we have made this evening. At times, it seems that everything comes up against a stone: the beauty of creation against the tragedy of sin; liberation from slavery against infidelity to the covenant; the promises of the prophets against the listless indifference of the people. So too, in the history of the Church and in our own personal history. It seems that the steps we take never take us to the goal. We can be tempted to think that dashed hope is the bleak law of life.

Today however we see that our journey is not in vain; it does not come up against a tombstone. A single phrase astounds the woman and changes history: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (*Lk* 24:5). Why do you think that everything is hopeless, that no one can take away

your own tombstones? Why do you give in to resignation and failure? Easter is the feast of tombstones taken away, rocks rolled aside. God takes away even the hardest stones against which our hopes and expectations crash: death, sin, fear, worldliness. Human history does not end before a tombstone, because today it encounters the "living stone" (cf. *1 Pet* 2:4), the risen Jesus. We, as Church, are built on him, and, even when we grow disheartened and tempted to judge everything in the light of our failures, he comes to make all things new, to overturn our every disappointment. Each of us is called tonight to rediscover in the Risen Christ the one who rolls back from our heart the heaviest of stones. So let us first ask:
What is the stone that I need to remove, what is its name?

Often what blocks hope is *the stone of discouragement*. Once we start thinking that everything is going badly and that things can't get worse, we lose heart and come to believe that death is stronger than life. We become cynical, negative and despondent. Stone upon stone, we build within ourselves a monument to our own dissatisfaction:
the sepulcher of hope.
Life becomes a succession of complaints and we grow sick in spirit. A kind of
tomb psychology
takes over: everything ends there, with no hope of emerging alive. But at that moment, we hear once more the insistent question of Easter:
Why do you seek the living among the dead?
The Lord is not to be found in resignation. He is risen; he is not there. Don't seek him where you will never find him: he is not the God of the dead but of the living (cf.
Mk
22:32). Do not bury hope!

There is another stone that often seals the heart shut: *the stone of sin*. Sin seduces; it promises things easy and quick, prosperity and success, but then leaves behind only solitude and death. Sin is looking for life among the dead, for the meaning of life in things that pass away.
Why do you seek the living among the dead?
Why not make up your mind to abandon that sin which, like a stone before the entrance to your heart, keeps God's light from entering in? Why not prefer Jesus, the true light (cf.
Jn
1:9), to the glitter of wealth, career, pride and pleasure? Why not tell the empty things of this world that you no longer live for them, but for the Lord of life?

Let us return to the women who went to Jesus' tomb. They halted in amazement before the stone that was taken away. Seeing the angels, they stood there, the Gospel tells us, "frightened, and bowed their faces to the ground" (*Lk* 24:5). They did not have the courage to look up. How often do we do the same thing? We prefer to remain huddled within our shortcomings, cowering

in our fears. It is odd, but why do we do this? Not infrequently because, glum and closed up within ourselves, we feel in control, for it is easier to remain alone in the darkness of our heart than to open ourselves to the Lord. Yet only he can raise us up. A poet once wrote: “We never know how high we are. Till we are called to rise” (E. DICKINSON). The Lord calls us to get up, to rise at his word, to look up and to realize that we were made for heaven, not for earth, for the heights of life and not for the depths of death: *Why do you seek the living among the dead?*

God asks us to view life as he views it, for in each of us he never ceases to see an irrepressible kernel of beauty. In sin, he sees sons and daughters to be restored; in death, brothers and sisters to be reborn; in desolation, hearts to be revived. Do not fear, then: the Lord loves your life, even when you are afraid to look at it and take it in hand. In Easter he shows you how much he loves that life: even to the point of living it completely, experiencing anguish, abandonment, death, and hell, in order to emerge triumphant to tell you: “You are not alone; put your trust in me!”. Jesus is a specialist at turning our deaths into life, our mourning into dancing (cf. *Ps* 30:11). With him, we too can experience a Pasch, that is, a Passover – from self-centeredness to communion, from desolation to consolation, from fear to confidence. Let us not keep our faces bowed to the ground in fear, but raise our eyes to the risen Jesus. His gaze fills us with hope, for it tells us that we are loved unfailingly and that however much we make a mess of things, his love remains unchanged. This is the one, non-negotiable certitude we have in life: his love does not change. Let us ask ourselves:
In my life, where am I looking?
Am I gazing at graveyards, or looking for the Living One?

Why do you seek the living among the dead? The women hear the words of the angels, who go on to say: “Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee” (
Lk
24:6). Those women had lost hope because they could not recall the words of Jesus, his call that took place in Galilee. Having lost the living memory of Jesus, they kept looking at the tomb. Faith always needs to go back to Galilee, to reawaken its first love for Jesus and his call: to *remember him*
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to turn back to him with all our mind and all our heart
. To return to a lively love of the Lord is essential. Otherwise, ours is a “museum” faith, not an Easter faith. Jesus is not a personage from the past; he is a person living today. We do not know him from history books; we encounter him in life. Today, let us remember how Jesus first called us, how he overcame our darkness, our resistance, our sins, and how he touched our hearts with his

The women, remembering Jesus, left the tomb. Easter teaches us that believers do not linger at

graveyards, for they are called to go forth to meet the Living One. Let us ask ourselves: *In my life, where am I going?*

Sometimes we go only in the direction of our problems, of which there are plenty, and go to the Lord only for help. But then, it is our own needs, not Jesus, to guide our steps. We keep seeking the Living One among the dead. Or again, how many times, once we have encountered the Lord, do we return to the dead, digging up regrets, reproaches, hurts, and dissatisfactions, without letting the Risen One change us? Dear brothers and sisters: let us put the Living One at the center of our lives. Let us ask for the grace not to be carried by the current, the sea of our problems; the grace not to run aground on the shoals of sin or crash on the reefs of discouragement and fear. Let us seek him in all things and above all things. With him, we will rise again.