I want to be a strong woman. And I can get sensitive or defensive when I look “weak.” I really don’t like that I have a hard time opening jars and I have to hand them to my husband to open. I suffered an injury in childbirth that means I should not lift more than fifteen pounds for the rest of my life. It’s so frustrating to feel weakened and I’m sensitive when it looks like physical strength and gender are correlated. I am also protective of my fellow sisters as we strive for equality and are often portrayed as the “weaker” sex. I am especially protective of Biblical women because the probably male writers of the Bible often have a difficult time celebrating the women in the story, minimizing their roles or leaving them out altogether.

Mark is one of those texts that I am really prepared to rail against. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are the first people to see the empty tomb, to hear the truth of the Risen Christ and to bring the message out into the world. These strong faithful women are the first ministers of the gospel. And yet, Mark’s telling of the story seems to make them look weak and afraid. First they go to the tomb and wonder “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” We can’t do it by ourselves, we are so weak. And then once they go in and the angel tells them that Jesus has been raised and they should go tell others, instead “they told no one for they were afraid.” And that’s where Mark leaves it. No celebrations, not even any Jesus. Mark leaves it on the women being afraid.

While keeping in mind the possibility that Mark may have a sexist slant to his writing, I think it’s also fair to let him off the hook here. This occasion of Easter morning was not really one for Rosie the Riveter or Wonder Woman. This was a scary time.

Keep in mind what these women and all who loved Jesus had just been through. They thought he was the messiah, their Lord, and they watched something they never expected. They watched him tried and almost released, but then the crowd called for his crucifixion and Pontius Pilate gave it to them. They saw him carry his own cross and they watched him die. A few days later they were still reeling. What would they do now?

In the midst of all of that, these women were afraid, they were in despair, as anyone would be.

And so they did what they could. They wanted to bring a little light into a dark situation. The only way they could do that was to honor his body and the life he had lived. So they
gathering their preparations—oils, spices and cloths—and took them to the tomb to honor their teacher, their savior. They did everything they could and they went as far as they could. And then they got to the place that they could not pass. Maybe that’s not weakness, maybe that’s just reality. There was a large stone between them and Jesus. And they had to ask “Who will roll away the stone for us?” Who will roll away the stone for us?

In my role as a pastor in a welcoming church in a progressive denomination, I hear lots of stories of stones. The truth is we all have something that is standing between us and the perfect vision of the risen Christ. Huge massive unmoving stones that are between people and the Risen Christ, stones between us and God’s pure and amazing love for us. Sexism is obviously a stone that has been there for me telling me that I am not worthy to approach my savior or to preach his good news. Men might have the parallel sexism stone to me, a message telling them they have to be strong all the time, never crying or showing their emotions openly. They always have to be able to move the stone and can’t admit when it’s too much. All the isms are huge stones between us and God—racism, sexism, and homophobia, and religious fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalism is a stone I hear about often. Yes, even our own religion can hide the true love of Jesus from us. In fact our own religion often does it best, as we have seen in most recently in Indiana.

Along with the big isms in our lives, those things that function as structural stones, we also have our own personal stones. We have been bullied, abused, and neglected by others. We have loved and lost. We have been sick or hurt. And that leaves us carrying anxieties, doubts, unrealistic expectations and oh that perfectionism. And then comes the depression, the self-loathing, and on and on. And that is who we are. Our lives are not perfect, we are not perfect. We have huge barriers between us and Jesus. We cannot roll away these stones by ourselves. And so we are left at the end of every day exhausted saying “who will roll away the stone for us?” “Who will roll away the stone for me?”

So what are the stones that are there for you now? What seems impassable? What is hiding God? And when you look at it, do you ask, “who will roll away the stone for me?”

It’s important to ask ourselves that question. We don’t ask this because we are weak or needy or there is something wrong with us. It takes strength and courage to honestly ask. We ask this question because we are God’s beautiful and flawed creations, we need love, we need God. We can’t do it all ourselves.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome knew that couldn’t do it all themselves either. However, it is important to note that while these women were scared and felt like there were difficult, if not impossible, barriers to overcome that first Easter morning, they still set out to do the hard work by making preparations. They didn’t let the barriers or stones stop them from getting ready to do this important work
of honoring Jesus. They gathered what they needed and they went, knowing what the barriers might be. In fact making their preparations and asking that question, “who will roll away the stone for us?” probably took more strength than we can imagine. They made preparations.

And like them, we can’t expect stones to move if we don’t prepare ourselves to face them down. We have to do everything we can. But these structural and personal stones are so big! How can we possibly prepare. Isn’t it easier to run away? Preparations look different in everybody’s lives. Sometimes it means therapy, let’s face it, often it means therapy. Sometimes preparations are being in community with healing people, volunteering our time to help others, and taking time for rest and renewal. We make our preparations.

We have made a lot of preparations here for this service today too. We have walked this journey of Lent from Ash Weds until now, facing the darkest parts of our lives. We have journeyed with Jesus through betrayal and doubt, through isolation and death. We have taken a look at our own structural stones and our personal stones. We have made ourselves ready on the inside. And we have also made ourselves ready on the outside. We have put up banners and brought in flowers. We have practiced special music and put on our finest clothes. And, of course, we at Hope have brought in our most delicious food. So we are ready on the inside and on the outside.

We celebrate Easter today with lilies and trumpets and candy because this is the way that we try to show on the outside what it feels like on the inside when we have prepared, when we have been honest, when we get to the end of our struggling and we whisper “who will roll away the stone for me?” And in that moment it happens, we know with all of our being, the voice from our loving divine parent, “My beloved, it is already rolled away.” God has already rolled the stone away! Or as the angel says, “he is not here, he is risen, go and find him!” Like the women at the tomb, we may be confused or uncertain but that does not make us weak. We are strong as face the cruel realities of our lives. We are strong as we admit our own limitations and look toward the Risen Christ as our hope. The stone IS rolled away.

And so hold on to the Spirit of this day, so you can hold it with you on the days when the road is hard and the stones seem unmovable. When you come to God in a desperate moment and say “who will roll away the stone for me?” Remember the joy, remember the lilies, remember the music, and remember the smiles of the children. Because these all represent on the outside what God is trying to show us on the inside. God’s greatest truth- from the cross, to the grave, and beyond. “My beloved, it is already rolled away.”