

Divine Deliverance  
I Samuel 7:3-13

The women faced an impossible situation as they headed for Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. Along with all of His disciples and so many other people who had heard about or experienced His miracles, they had come to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah the Lord had promised would come, the Son of David who would give them independence from the Roman Empire and usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity.

But it had all gone so terribly wrong. Instead of leading His people in a revolution against the Romans, Jesus had allowed Himself to be captured, tried and beaten. His political and religious enemies had conspired to put Him to death, crucifying Him even though He had never done a sinful thing in His whole life.

And to add insult to injury, everyone had been in such a rush to bury Him on Friday that the women hadn't even had the chance to anoint His body with spices in the customary way. Now that the Sabbath was over they could do at least that much – if they could find someone to roll the stone away from the tomb, a stone that was much too heavy for any of them.

So they came to the tomb on Easter morning, not in joyous expectation of Jesus' resurrection, but in anguished, helpless, hopeless despair.

But they weren't the first to experience such an impossible situation, were they? For one thousand years earlier, Samuel and the Israelites had experienced the same the kind of hopelessness when a huge army of Philistines approached them. For it wasn't just that the Philistines greatly outnumbered them. No, the Philistines were also technologically advanced, having learned how to forge their swords and spears from iron: that meant the Israelites' old-fashioned bronze weapons stood no chance of winning in battle. Worse yet, the Philistines were able to race around in their horse-drawn war chariots, while the Israelites were forced to fight on foot. No, it's no wonder that verse 7 tells us that the Israelites were afraid. There was just no way, no way they could possibly stand up to the Philistines, let alone defeat them.

And maybe that's how you feel this Easter. Maybe the problems you face – the fatigue or frustration, the addiction or besetting sin, the loneliness or grief – seem just as overwhelming. Maybe you have been sidelined by sickness or infirmity, and you just can't do the things you want to, the things you used to do. Maybe you're stressed out at work, but you don't find much comfort at home either. And on holidays like today, it's so easy to miss folks who are no longer with us to join in the celebration – and there's not a thing you can do to bring them back.

So, maybe your situation seems just as overwhelming as those fearsome Philistines. Maybe you feel just as helpless and hopeless as the women wondering who would roll the stone away from Jesus' tomb.

And maybe you've tried lots of things to fix your problems. Maybe you've thrown yourself into your work, doing the best you can to improve your family and your community. Maybe you've carefully budgeted your time and your resources, only to find them woefully insufficient to the tasks that overwhelm you. Maybe you've run out of ideas and energy and enthusiasm. And still your problems remain – still the stone sealing the tomb is firmly in place.

You know, many of the Jews of Jesus' day had done everything they could to overcome their oppression. That's why they had gotten so excited about Jesus. After all, the Romans had conquered the Mediterranean world by their superior organization, uniting everyone under the authority of one man, one emperor. Augustus had been the first of those emperors, and he was able to seize power just because his grandmother was Julius Caesar's sister. So surely, the Jews reasoned, they just needed their own emperor. Surely, a miracle-working Messiah like Jesus could unite all of His people, leading them in a successful rebellion against the Romans. For isn't that what God had promised them? Didn't God want them to be wealthy and happy and free?

But Jesus wouldn't play along. In spite of His obviously supernatural power, He displayed no interest in expelling the Romans from the Promised Land. So, after he was dead, what chance did any of the Jews have against the money, the organization, the sheer power of the Roman Empire? It seemed like they had nothing left to try. Yes, as the women approached the tomb, it all seemed hopeless, impossible.

Of course, the Jews of Samuel's day had a similar reaction to their overwhelming problems. For when they saw the strength and sophistication of all the foreign peoples that surrounded them, they also thought they could fight fire with fire. That's why they so quickly transferred their allegiance to all kinds of foreign gods: they thought that the gods who had strengthened their enemies would give the same kind of power to them.

But as the book of Judges recounts time and time again, that strategy just didn't work. For how could Gods that aren't even real possibly save them from powerful warriors like the Philistines who continued to take advantage of them? Yes, try as they might, no matter what or who they may have worshipped, the Israelites remained hopeless and helpless.

So, what did Samuel tell the Israelites to do in the face of their impossible problems? His message was a simple one: return. In other words, he called them to repent, to turn away from all the foreign gods in which they had placed their trust and to turn back to the one true God. For no matter how bleak their situation may have been, Samuel promised them that the God of Israel had the power to deliver them.

Now, believing that message took just as much faith back then as it does today. After all, Samuel was no superhero like Samson had been. He had no miraculous power to overcome their technological deficits or to guarantee them victory in combat. No, Samuel was just a prophet, someone who called the people to trust in God, in spite of the overwhelming power of the Philistine armies that faced them.

And maybe the call to repent is just as unreal for you. Maybe you don't see how a God you can't see can possibly do anything about your jerk of a boss, or your nagging wife or your insensitive husband. Maybe you believe that if God is real, He wouldn't have let you get sick or your loved ones die. And you don't see why you should change the way you live just because some 2000-year-old book says you should. In the light of the very real problems you have in your real life, faith in God just doesn't make sense to you.

Well you know, the women who came to the tomb had to exercise the same kind of faith, at least at first. For when they came to the tomb, all they saw was that it was empty. Sure, there were some amazing angels standing around. But those angels really did the same thing Samuel did: they just reminded the women of something Jesus had already told all of His disciples – that He would rise from

the dead. And so, just like Samuel's people had to do, and just like we have to do today, the women had to trust the word of the Lord, no matter how little sense it made.

And make no mistake: the resurrection of Christ didn't make any more sense to the women who first went to the tomb than it does today. There's no scientific explanation that can account for all the facts. There's no other example in human history of someone spontaneously walking out of his own tomb after such a brutal, public execution. No, to make sense of what the angels told them, the women couldn't appeal to their reason or their experience or their tradition, and neither can we. We simply have to trust that what the angels said is true.

Well, what happened one thousand years earlier when the people believed what Samuel told them? What happened after they put away their foreign gods and confessed their sins? What happened when they put their trust in the Lord alone to save them from the Philistines?

Well, just as was the case with the women who went to the tomb, none of their outward circumstances changed, at least at first. The Philistines were still gathering their overwhelming forces to attack, and the Israelites were still shaking with fear. Moreover, the offering Samuel sacrificed on their behalf seemed to be woefully inadequate for such a serious situation. After all, most people in those days believed that moments of great cultural crisis called for a valuable sacrifice to be offered to their false gods. So, they would offer a powerful, expensive bull, or perhaps even a human being. You see, they thought they could manipulate their gods, bargaining with them: "I paid you off, so now you owe me" – that's the way they prayed.

But instead, Samuel offered the least valuable, and the most helpless of sacrifices: that of a newborn lamb. Samuel's offering thus illustrated and underlined how weak the people were and how completely they were depending on the Lord. Samuel was thus making it clear that he, along with the rest of the people, had given up trying to manipulate God or bargain with Him or somehow force his hand. Instead, they were simply crying out to God to save them.

And that's exactly what God did. For in the face of the God Whose power is displayed in crashing thunder, all those high-tech iron weapons and powerful chariots were completely useless – I mean, even modern tanks and planes can't stop tornados like the one that devastated Rolling Fork, right?

And so, with that kind of power on their side, the only thing the Israelites had to do was to chase their enemies, and then to set up a monument to the Lord's providence. But instead of making it a monument to Samuel's leadership or to their own faithfulness, they simply called it, "Ebenezer," which means, "stone of help."

And what happened when the women who went to the empty tomb believed the angels, that what Jesus had predicted three times before His death had actually happened? What happened when their sorrow and helplessness was replaced with the confident joy of faith in the impossible? Jesus revealed Himself to them. Jesus showed them that He was, in fact, able to defeat enemies that were much worse than even the most oppressive of Roman legions. For as Jesus walked out of His tomb, He overcame sin itself, along with the death that is its inevitable consequence.

And isn't the Lord calling all of us to place the same kind of faith in Him? Doesn't He challenge us to believe that the God Who could put the Philistines to flight can solve all of our problems too? Can the most messed up of our relationships and the most engrained of our bad habits be too difficult for

Him to straighten out? Doesn't our God have the power to heal the sick and open the eyes of the blind, the power to soften even the hardest of hearts?

In fact, doesn't the God Who raised Jesus from the dead have the power to raise all of His faithful people from our own graves one day? And doesn't He have the power to raise all of us up from the death of sin into the life of confident righteousness even today? Doesn't our God have the power to turn our sadness and grief, our fear and despair into joy, just as He did for the women who trudged to the tomb and the disciples who cowered behind locked doors?

And the good news is that there's nothing we need to do to earn this amazing grace. In fact, we don't even need to offer something so weak and helpless as a suckling lamb. For the Lord has provided the Lamb for Himself, giving up the greatest of all sacrifices on our behalf: His only Son. And Jesus' resurrection proves that His sacrifice has been accepted on behalf of all who would trust in Him the way the people did in Samuel's time, the way the women did as they ran from the empty tomb with joy.

So hear the good news: if you return to the Lord with all your heart, if you put away your trust in anyone or anything else, He will deliver you. For Jesus isn't in that tomb anymore. No, He has risen from the dead, just as He said: risen with the power to save us all. Hear the good news, and rejoice.