

Living Stones

I Peter 2: 4-8

**First Presbyterian Church
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How did people ever get those huge rocks to Stonehenge? How did they get them hoisted into place, and that in such a precise way that you can mark the solstice by them? Who carved the great faces on the stones in the Easter Islands, and what do they mean? The long, tall standing stones in the Orkney Islands north of Scotland cry out with meaning. But what is that meaning? Why are they

there? What are the stones saying?

Such stones have a history. There is a story in them. But their voices are mute. They point to something beyond themselves, but we do not know what it is. There is much speculation. Perhaps aliens came down and left these stones as a sign for primitive humans. Perhaps people raised them up as a response to a dream or vision. We can sense that they have a spiritual meaning, but nothing is precise.



When I have looked out toward Table Rock in North Carolina, a sense of mystery always filled me. That slab of rock looks like an altar. I have walked on it, and felt the awe of its 360 degree view. I know in my bones that religious rites have been performed on that peak. It seems to speak, but I don't know what it's saying.

Such standing stones and natural rocks make a great metaphor for our age. People yearn to be addressed from beyond. We ache for spiritual significance. There must be something more to this busy, packed life. But we don't really know what we're looking for, and are not sure we want the answer to be very specific. Agnosticism is always safer!



In today's passage, a great stone has appeared. A huge stone, of staggering weight and size has been placed in Zion, in Jerusalem, in the rubble of the Temple ruins. It is there for all to see. But what is its meaning? For some it looks to be the kind of stone that could be the foundation for a great structure. Or perhaps it could be the beautiful capstone to support the arch of an immense building. For others, though, this stone is an obstacle. It is right in the way of business as usual. The stone prevents anything else from being done at that site. People are squabbling over it, bumping into it, trying to move it out of the center of town. But we see that it is immovable. The stone is now a permanent piece of this world, of human history.

This great stone, unlike those at Stonehenge or the Orkneys, is alive. It does not just symbolize a time long ago. Rather, it speaks in the present moment, fraught with meaning for this hour, yet rooted in all that has been accomplished earlier in our midst. The living stone, of course, is Jesus Christ. The eternal Son of God himself has entered our world. His Father laid down this stone in the midst of his people Israel, to be the cornerstone, the foundation of a new temple, a new way of meeting God which would bless all the world. He is the beginning of a new humanity. On this foundation, the weight of the whole world can rest and be held.

In Jesus Christ, the living stone, the Lord God came to us in light and love. To use another image, God showed his face. In Jesus, he said, "This is who I am. This is how I am. Having shown you myself in Jesus, you know that I am no other way. Joined to Jesus, you, too, may know my joy and my love." Jesus' arrival is the cornerstone and foundation of a new world. We build our whole reborn lives on him. For those who have felt that all their lives the ground under their feet was unsteady, this is tremendous news. For those whose family relationships were always unreliable, perhaps even wildly chaotic or even hostile, the news of this solid rock love is a joyous tidings indeed. For those who have seen that fortunes in the world crumble, that athletic prowess fades faster than Olympic gold tarnishes, that title and inheritances, conquests and control games slip away like sand, the foundation of Jesus Christ is a lifesaver. For those whose days have seemed cold, lifeless, wind swept and bleak, the arrival of a stone that is alive, warm with love and solid with peace is precious. We are drawn to him.

So Peter writes, “As you come to him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious...” One of the first things that has to be said about this stone is that many rejected it. Jesus was not accepted in his day, even by his own people. He was rebuffed by the very humanity he came to save. The religious leaders had a particular problem with this young rabbi who seemed to see the entire story of their nation in terms of himself. Jesus came to heal and to forgive, to love and to restore. He also came talking about himself. Jesus, the same Jesus who gave us the Golden Rule, claimed to know his Father in heaven in a way no one else does. The same Jesus who said to love your enemies also declared that he was the fulfillment of all the Scriptures. The one who welcomed sinners simultaneously demanded that no one could come to his Father, or enter the Kingdom of Heaven, without him.

For some, Jesus was the foundation stone for a new, joyful life. The Lord knew, though, that for some the living stone would be a stumbling block. Peter goes on to quote from Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” In fact, Jesus himself quoted this verse when he told the parable of the tenants. The story is one of the best attested in the New Testament, recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus told of a landowner who had leased out his vineyard. When he sent his own people to collect the harvest, the renting farmers killed them. This happened again, so the landowner sent his own Son, thinking surely, “They will respect my son.” But with all the more vehemence, the tenant farmers killed the landowner’s son. Then Jesus pronounced judgement on those wicked tenants and asked, “Have you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’ ...He who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.” (Matthew 21: 33-46). Anyone hearing him would have understood. The vineyard owner is the Lord God. His chosen people Israel, as representatives of all humanity, were to care for God’s realm. But they rejected the prophets. And when God sent his own son, they rejected him too. Jesus claimed to be that son. When the Pharisees heard this parable, they were so mad that they fulfilled the very prediction of the story. They set out immediately to kill him.

There is something about Jesus that still provokes extreme responses in people. Some are filled with love, fall on their knees and offer him their lives. They want to build their lives anew on the rock of Christ. He is precious to them. Others find they must turn away. Their reaction may be hostile, verbally or even physically violent towards those who name the name of Jesus as Lord. They just smack up against this great rock in human history and find themselves as offended as the Pharisees. How could this man claim to be the very meaning of a thousand

years of Scripture? How could he quote Scriptures and declare that they were about himself? How could he be so definite about God, even calling him his Father?

Indeed, this tendency is in all of us. Reserving the right to keep our personal, private understanding of God and the Scriptures runs very deep in us. Our desire to retain our autonomy is so great that we will turn from the very hand that wants to save us. Our fierce yearning to be our own gods provokes us to lash out at the true God when he shows himself to us.

So Peter also quotes Scripture about Jesus which declares that he is “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” The Greek word is *scandalon*, a scandal. There is something scandalous about Jesus. The thought that God came to us as a particular human being just offends us. How could God become flesh and blood? Why would God come only to one particular people? How can this one man be Lord of all? This is what theologians call the scandal of particularity. The God of the universe showed his face supremely and definitively in one man. The good news is that God has not remained aloof or silent. He has come to us. The bad news is that in showing himself to be this way, he demands allegiance and surrender to the Lordship of Jesus and to no other.

In response to this scandal, we might try to relegate Jesus to be a teacher of ethics, or even a doer of good deeds, but that would be to cover up the truth of who he is and what he said. He claimed, outrageously, over and over, to be the One. He is the truth about God and life, about forgiveness and death, the key to the universe. No other leader of an enduring religion ever made such claims about himself. No other religion claims that its followers enter a living relationship with a still-living founder. No other religion claims that now a man sits on the right hand of the throne of God. For many, this is just too much. It offends us. For if this is the way it is, then all other knowing and relating, all other claims about God have to be reordered around the person of Jesus. He is the one who died and rose—he is the great Stone around which the stream of history breaks.

Peter goes on to write, “And you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The living cornerstone is Christ Jesus. His people are living stones also, built upon his foundation. As we join together, we rise to become a temple. The temple of God is no longer just the building in Jerusalem. It is the activity of the people who are united to Jesus joining together to tell his story, sing his praise and proclaim his victory, his Lordship, his goodness

and grace. Our sacrifices are no longer the blood of animals, but the gift of our lives offered in joyful response to all Jesus has done for us. We are his church, his house. We are living stones, joined together. We rise in praise and thanks, acceptable to our Father not in ourselves but in Christ. Built on Christ, we rise and worship in Christ. He is our all and all.

Joined to him, we each have a place, a needed important place. And when the church gathers throughout the earth, the temple is a great, mighty witness to the world. How does the world church join? Not necessarily in one big stadium event or conference. But when every local congregation gathers faithfully, whether there are five or five thousand, the temple of the church is built freshly in that moment. Our local unity on the one foundation of Christ our Lord creates our solidarity with all others who bow their knees and hearts to the one Lord Jesus of heaven and earth.

There is no other basis for church unity. This is why it is so important that the church in America remains faithful to our Lord and his ethics. To do so, we will have to bear the stigma of his scandalous claims. In the pluralistic age, we will pay a price for our beliefs and morality. But we are not alone. The world church is counting on us. Indeed, the churches in the global south—in South America, Africa, India and Indonesia, many of whom endure persecution, are pining for the church in the west to stay strong, to stay true. When we turn aside from enduring the price of the scandal of Jesus, we actually scandalize our brothers and sisters in the global south. They are dismayed when western churches fade into our secular culture. A bland, enculturated American church foists a kind of theological jingoism on the world church when we fail to stand firm. So much depends on our taking our place as living stones built on the one foundation of Jesus the cornerstone.

So this is who we are: a spiritual temple built of living stones upon the cornerstone of Christ. Our gathering, our faithfulness comprise the church which the world will see. We are joined to him and one another. When we gather, the music soars and the praises rise. When we disperse, we do not lose our connection. We go out still as living stones, part of the temple of Christ, declaring the news of his arrival in the world until we meet again.