

*Easter Sermon Series The Church: A Signpost of Hope – “Greater Works”*

*John 14:8-14; I Peter 2:4-10; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16*

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*Salem United Methodist Church*

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The tulips and daffodils have lost their petals. We are no longer singing, “Alleluia.” It appears that Easter is over, yet we are still in the midst of the Fifty Days of Easter. The Church remembers season as the time Jesus spent with his disciples after the Resurrection and before his Ascension into heaven. During this Easter Season, we are exploring ways in which Salem is and can be a Signpost of Hope to our families, communities, and the world.

Consider the stone. They come in all shapes and sizes. A stone is not a plant or an animal. It is not alive. It is hard and solid. It is made of nonmetallic mineral matter. Remember the twenty question game where one of the questions asked, “Is it plant, animal, mineral.” Stones are minerals. They don’t live. They come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. The big ones are called rocks. According to the dictionary, a rock is a naturally occurring solid aggregate of one or more minerals which tell the history of the earth and provide material for us to build our future. It tells our history in that by looking at a rock we can tell if it was formed from the solidification of lava, or formed by heat, pressure, or chemicals, or the sediments of plants and/or animals. So rocks tell the history of our earth. The structures we build out of rocks both tell our history and provide us with a future. Humans have been building with rocks since the beginning of time. Creating a structure with rocks is a little like putting a puzzle pieces together. The different sized stones have to fit together for the structure to hold together. We have used stone to build walls, fences, bridges, aqueducts, houses, churches, and schools. These structures of stones and rocks are so sturdy that they last longer than the lives of those who built them.

Living in our metro area, we probably do not consider stones very much, except perhaps to create patios or walkways. We have lush green lawns and budding trees. But in Jerusalem where Peter probably was living when he wrote his letter, he was surrounded by stones and rocks. First of all, Jerusalem sits on a hill made of rock. All the buildings, the city wall, and the streets were made out of stone. So if Peter looked out the window as he was writing his letter, what did he see? Stones. What encouraging word could he offer these early followers of Jesus who were facing ridicule, arrest, abuse, and possibly execution for their beliefs that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah? He knows the only way to offer them hope is to draw them closer to the Messiah, the Christ, so he writes, “Come to him, a living stone.” Our first reaction to these two words, “living stone,” is that it is an oxymoron. These words are self-contradictory. Stones don’t live. They aren’t animal or plant. They are mineral matter. It’s like saying “jumbo shrimp,” “pretty ugly, or “same difference.” The two words mean the exact opposite, yet when we put them together they get our attention. We have to stop and think. Living stone? Huh? How can Jesus be a living stone? A stone has no life in it. John the Baptist preached at the Jordan River that, “God is able from these [river] stones to raise up children to Abraham.” What God is able to take something inert and create life out of it? Yes, God can and did. Remember Jesus was dead, but God resurrected him? We proclaim every Easter as Mary Magdalene did that first Easter, “Jesus is alive!” What had no life now has life. But Peter doesn’t stop there. We are not just to come to Jesus as a Living Stone, but Peter continues to share with us that we are like living stones. He gets our attention again with this oxymoron. We are like living stones. Have you ever felt like a stone? Have you ever felt like an inert object sitting there? Having people ignore you? Or perhaps getting kicked down the road or having people step on you or over you? Or maybe you have felt like you are pushing a heavy rock up a steep hill. With one slip, you and the rock will go tumbling down the hill. Wouldn’t it be great to be a stone that could come alive? Perhaps to bloom so others would notice your beauty, to have a use or a function, perhaps be a signpost directing people. But this is not what Peter was talking about. He doesn’t see us as lone stones, but living stones brought together to build a spiritual house, a community of faith. One lone stone does not a faith community make. It takes all of us stony living beings with our rough edges, smooth surfaces, cracks and all. God puts all of us together to create something of beauty, something that can witness to the world about the Living Stone.

Peter was writing his letter after the Romans destroyed the Temple. There was no spiritual house. There was no place to come and offer sacrifices to God. With no Temple or sacrifices, the priests were no longer needed so they dispersed. Peter takes what they no longer have, what is dead, what is a low point for these Messiah believing Jews and turns it around, breathes new life into it. There may not be a Temple, but Jesus is not dead. He is alive and Peter says we are not dead like these stones around us. Jesus has made our lives more real than ever. He is like a Living Stone, dead but now alive. We are living stones so don’t sulk behind your stone walls, but get out, live. Jesus is alive and has called us to carry on his work. Perhaps, Peter remembered the words Jesus spoke before he was crucified.

“The Father who dwells in me does his works...believe me because of the works themselves...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” Did Peter sit and look out over all the rocks and stones in Jerusalem and wonder how a small group of followers could do greater works than Jesus. He had seen Jesus heal the broken and feed multitudes from scraps. How could believers do greater works than these? And yet he, too, experienced the Holy Spirit being breathed upon him and others. He has preached and thousands came to believe. Yes, he witnessed how God had done greater works through him, a living stone.

The Holy Spirit transformed Peter, a fisherman, into a preacher, a priest. So he states that all God is creating all believers to be a priesthood fit for a King. The ministry of all Christians comes from this passage. Each of us by our Baptism is a minister of the Gospel. By claiming Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are to be an expression of the mind, heart, and mission of Jesus. And we are not to do this alone. We are to be in a community of Christians, sharing in a common life of thanksgiving and devotion, of celebration and discipleship, of witness and service. We are not to be a lone stone. God intends to use the differences in us and put us together like a puzzle to create a holy structure of people who serve a purpose. Together we can support, challenge, and hold each other accountable in our faith. Together we can discern where Christ is calling us to the needs and injustices of the world. Together we can discover our passion to meet those needs. The part about thanksgiving, devotion, celebration, and growing in our discipleship happens here with this group of living stones. But we do not do these things to make ourselves feel good about ourselves, but so we can be that the people of God who can both proclaim God’s might acts and do the greater works.

Jesus knew we would have the ability to do greater works. Yes, he is the Son of God but when he took on our human form he was limited only be able to be in one place at one time. He told his disciples I have to return to my Father so you can receive the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit can be in more than one place at one time. The Holy Spirit can be in all believers all over the world all the time. People who have served on mission teams believe that they are taking God with them to their place of mission. What they discover is that God is already there, welcoming them to this part of God’s priesthood. Even though these teams were sent to give a witness with their hands or with their voice, God met them at this place and witnessed to them.

Yes, as Christians we have done greater works than the man from Galilee who was crucified and risen from the dead. We have taken the message of love, forgiveness, and salvation to every part of the world. For over 2000 years, Christians have been taking the message of God’s love for them to every part of the world. The United Methodist Church’s is no exception. Currently we have mission efforts in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and here in the USA. No one person can be this witness. To build these kinds of spiritual houses it takes many living stones offering prayer support, financial, physical, and spiritual support. Every dollar that we place in our offering a portion of it goes to support the church’s mission efforts, to build that spiritual house.

Building a spiritual house takes stones that are transformed from their inertness to being alive and lifegiving. Often congregations tell their history not by the lives that were changed from dead to living stones, but by when church buildings were built. We celebrate our history through the structures in which we gather for worship, in which hearts were strangely warmed, in which we have met the Living Stone. These houses are spiritually special to us. But even without a church building, we would still be the church. Peter continues with his stone imagery, however. He takes the Living Stone image of Jesus and turns it into Jesus as the Cornerstone, chosen and precious. Often a cornerstone is a ceremonial stone in which the dates of the building are written and current items are placed in it so it becomes a type of time capsule. But a true cornerstone is the first stone set in the foundation. All other stones will be set in relation to the cornerstone. The position of the entire structure depends on the setting of the cornerstone. Peter states that Christ as the Living Stone is the one that we are to build upon.

Our Church Council is in the process of discerning a vision for Salem. They are listening and wrestling with what God is calling us to become in the future. I ask all of us to pray for our leadership. Peter shared his vision for the church in this passage. He chose a great image of the stone. It lies on the ground and does nothing, but it is hard and strong. It is just waiting to be built into something useful and beautiful that will last a very long time. The stone tells our history and provides material for the future. We are called to be living stones. God can transform our inert parts, our dead parts and breathe new life into them so we can build the spiritual house or signpost that welcomes everyone and offers hope.

**Reflection Questions:** How am I being a living stone? How am I being called to be a living stone? How is Salem being a spiritual house? How is God calling Salem to be a spiritual house?

**Resources:** *Feasting With the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; “Living Stones,” by Jennifer Williams, (April 13, 2014) [www.minsitrymatters.com](http://www.minsitrymatters.com); *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2012*; <http://www.umcmmission.org/Explore-Our-Work/Mission-Map>

