

Following the Risen Jesus: Chosen for Jesus

Exodus 19:1-8, 1 Peter 2:1-10

Good morning! Happy May! Next Sunday is Mother's Day, so that is a free early warning to all of you children and husbands about a task you may have to do this week! The week ahead is going to be very different from what I imagined. On Saturday our daughter Gracie is getting married. We will be here in Salt Lake City. Her sister, who is the maid of honor, will be in Los Angeles, and the ceremony is taking place in St Louis Missouri. We'll be attending our daughter's wedding on Zoom. Of course, it is an even bigger disruption for Gracie—she is getting married in a back yard with a handful of people, not a crowded church. And she is having people driving by her house instead of hosting them at a reception. We are all looking forward to getting to celebrate together later, but there is definitely a sense of loss for all of us right now. Just yesterday Alice and I were talking about feeling a little heartbroken because we have to miss being there for Gracie and because she doesn't get to have the big day she's dreamt of.

On the plus side, as the father of the bride, only Alice will be able to see me tear up and it IS cheaper!

What is hardest for you as we move into month 3 of COVID disruption? Some people are facing serious health challenges. Some are encountering mounting bills and economic pressure. I am so grateful that our Deacons are working to get help to those who need it. This is a great time to support the deacons with your giving.

But for most of us, I think the biggest challenge during this time is being separated. Isolated. Not seeing our friends, not being able to go visit someone. Not being able to give a big hug to a loved one. We are social animals—we are made for relationships.

Our scriptures today are focused on this same idea—we are designed to be together. Together with each other, together with God, and together FOR the sake of others. That togetherness is the heart of our faith.

In these weeks after Easter we are being taught by the Apostle Peter about what it means to follow the Risen Jesus. Peter began his letter celebrating the remarkable new life that we can enjoy because of Easter—because of Jesus’ resurrection. Last week we talked about the “so what” of Easter—how that fresh start can show up in our lives today. Today Peter reminds us that the purpose of this new life is togetherness—it is to live in love with each other, with God, and with others. We are hardwired to be in relationships. There is no such thing as a lone ranger Christian—we are all in this together! We are knit together to support each other, to encourage each other, and work together. That is what we are doing—as we worship together, as we meet and study and pray online, as we make calls or check on a friend, as we make sandwiches, -- in every one of those things we are being the church! Today’s main take aways are that 1) we are built together to represent God in the world; 2) Jesus is our cornerstone; and 3) we are given a mission together. We are living stones built together; Jesus is our cornerstone; and we are a people called to show God’s goodness and love out to the world.

Peter calls Jesus a living stone. A living stone who was rejected by people but chosen and precious to God. Then Peter compares us to Jesus—we are also like living stones. If we are sometimes rejected by people, we can rest secure in the reality that God accepts us. Thanks to Jesus, the barriers between us and God are down!

Peter says that we are like living stones being built into a spiritual house. Living stone is a curious phrase. It sounds like a contradiction doesn’t it? But Jesus is the *living* stone because of Easter. He died and is alive again—the living stone! His followers are like him—we are like living stones too. We’ve been given new life, and we are being built together into a spiritual home— into God’s living temple! The church is not now and never was a building or a place. It is always and only a PEOPLE. The New Testament uses two images over and over to describe the church—to describe US. We are the body of Christ and the living Temple of God. Both images convey the same message: that we are created to be together; that each of us have a role to play; and that all of us together are actually the presence of God in the world! Have you ever thought about that? WE are meant to be God’s presence in the world!

From start to end the Bible story is about God seeking to be in relationship with people. It is the story of the God who never gives up! Now, after Easter, we get to live out that story by living with God now and being God's presence in the world to others.

All of Peter's original readers were very familiar with temples—there were various pagan temples in all of their hometowns. The whole idea of a temple was that it was where you met a god. It was a god's house. Peter draws a contrast—those temples, built with dead stones, filled with dead idols, are nothing but dead ends. But now the living God is doing a new thing through Jesus, who is the source of life. He is building a living temple, made of living stones—you and me. And this temple isn't limited to one place, it is spread out all over the world. He sends his Spirit to live in that temple—in us! And that means that now people can encounter God all over the world through--- YOU! You and me and all of us together are God's temple in the world—we are how people can experience God in the world

I want to be clear, this isn't something that we DO. No, God is the one working. Peter says that we are *being built* into this spiritual house. We are not doing the building, we are just the building materials that God is using to build his presence in the world. So our first point is that we are living stones together. We are built together so that we can be God's presence in the world. We are God's presence in the world today!

Alice and I love to walk around the Avenues neighborhood. We saw one house that had a big, welcoming wraparound porch. The only problem was the porch was sinking! The corner of the porch did not have a good foundation and it was slowly sinking into the ground, pulling the rest of the porch with it and away from the house! It was a disaster! The owners had to jack up the whole porch and put in a new foundation underneath and then build back up to the porch. The key thing about any building is having a good foundation. Without that, the building will collapse. And the key to a good foundation is a good cornerstone. The cornerstone is the first stone that is set in masonry construction. Every other stone is set in reference to the cornerstone. The cornerstone determines the position of everything else.

Jesus is the cornerstone for God's house. This image is used over and over—in fact, *every time* that cornerstone is used in the New Testament, it refers to Jesus. He is the one who determines where all the other stones go. Everything else only works in reference to Jesus.

Peter quotes Psalm 118—The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Jesus himself quoted this same verse and also applied it to himself. The church—this collection of Jesus Followers, of living stones—must be built on the foundation of Jesus and be guided by him, or we will collapse.

Jesus is presented as a stone that *either* is the cornerstone or that trips you up. Jesus either becomes the foundation and guide and basis for your life, or you stumble over him. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground. John Calvin put it like this: "there is no middle way between these two, we must either build on Him, or be dashed against Him." We must either be built on him or be dashed against him. Everyone is faced with this choice. Will they accept Jesus as a precious possession like God does, or will they reject him? What is Jesus for you? Is he a rock of offense, something that you trip over and cuss about? Or is he the cornerstone of your life? Is he the thing that orients your life and gives it purpose and meaning and direction? Trying to ignore Jesus doesn't work—you end up tripping over him. Ultimately everyone will respond to Jesus somehow. The way we respond makes all the difference.

What does it look like for us to be that kind of church—to be the real presence of Jesus for the world right now, in the middle of a pandemic? To be the kind of church that helps people see the real Jesus? Our former church in Washington, located just a few miles from COVID 19 ground zero, is doubling down on reaching out to people in need. They are signing dozens of people up to drop off groceries or stock a food pantry for poor families in their town. Not only that, they are providing extra money to their mission partners around the world so those partners can help people impacted by the pandemic. Annie's team is one of their mission partners, and they are now getting to work with their neighbors in LA to share the extra resources the church made available to them. In her neighborhood many people are at risk working essential jobs AND are afraid to get medical help because of their immigration status. Now her team can help them get the support they need. That is what the church does. It is what you are doing as the deacons reach out to help those who have lost jobs or are sick. It is what you are doing when you check in with a friend or a neighbor or drop off some groceries or a meal. It is what you are doing as you walk for water. It is what you are doing as you pray and then respond to how God nudges you to help.

Peter then calls us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession. God has taken this ragtag, diverse bunch of people and shaped them into a people together! Peter applies the same labels that God used in the Old Testament for Israel, his chosen people, to this new group, the followers of Jesus. Peter dramatically expands the people of Israel—those who God chose to be a blessing to the whole world—to include all of us following Jesus! After God rescued Israel from Egypt he said they would be kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Peter says that is who we are too, now. Our background doesn't matter. Our past, our failures, our embarrassments—none of those things matter now. After Easter as we follow Jesus, now WE are God's special possession. He shapes us into a people together. A nation of priests. We are all priests of God. A priest is someone who goes between God and other people --we go before God on *behalf of* others and we bring God's presence *to* others. That is not something that is just for clergy—this is not a Pastor Chris and Pastor Steve thing—this is ALL of us! We all help bring God into a world desperate for the Good News.

Listen to how the Message puts it: “You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day-difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.”

From zero to hero—that is the good news of the Gospel! We are God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him! As we live in God's marvelous light, it draws others to Him too. God is building us to be his temple—to be where God is present in our world—where his love and care and healing shine out into our dark and broken world. Following Jesus is never just about us. It is ALWAYS about others. We are together, for the sake of others. We are saved to serve, not saved so we can thumb our noses at everyone else. We are called to bring the reality of God's love home. Home to our neighbors, to our families, to our school and our work—to care for them and let them embrace the living stone and build their lives on the Rock that will last.

Church—let's be the church, right now. As we check in on friends and neighbors, as we pray, as we drop off food, as we support the deacons-- whatever we do, let's do it so Jesus' wonderful light shines out.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for being our cornerstone. We ask that you make us into living stones in your image. Build us into your temple in the world—make us people who reflect your love out into our world, help us to bear the light of your love into a world that is so often stumbling in the dark. Use us, Lord Jesus. Amen.