

**The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 10, 2020**

**The Lessons:** Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60  
 Psalm 146  
 1 Peter 2:2-10  
 John 14:1-14

**The Hymns:** # 645 Built on the Rock the Church shall stand  
 # 646 Church of God, elect and glorious  
 # 644 The Church's one foundation

**The Collect:** O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what you promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**The Sermon:** Three Stones, One Church (1 Peter 2:2-10)

The Word of the Lord from 1 Peter 2:4-5: "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 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." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Friends in Christ:

I. Three Stones in One

When Jesus asked the disciples in Matthew 16, "Who do you say that I am?" It was Simon Peter who confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:15-18). Now, many have taken the Lord's words to mean that the Church is built on Peter, ostensibly the first bishop of Rome—his name in Greek (*petros*) means "rock," after all. But the rock on which the Church is built is not Peter, but the One whom Peter confessed: "the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Don't take my word for it. Take Peter's, because he speaks of this very thing in today's Epistle reading. Speaking of Christ, Peter quotes the Old Testament and says, "For it stands in Scripture: „Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame" (Isaiah 28:16). And, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22). And, "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Isaiah 8:14). Now, it's not quite so

clear in the English, which uses “cornerstone” twice; but as Peter uses different words in the Greek each time, it appears that he’s teaching us more about the sort of stone Christ is for us.

There’s the cornerstone, of course, the one that serves as the corner of the foundation. This was the biggest stone of the building above grade, and it was carefully measured because it was the reference point from which the rest of the building would be built. If the cornerstone were poorly crafted or out of alignment, the entire building would be off-kilter; and when your walls are made of stone or brick, you want them plumb, square and true or else there’s going to be trouble later on and the building may never be sound.

Christ is, of course, the cornerstone of the Church. The Church is not built upon the teachings of man, which are unstable as sand and constantly shifting. Ephesians 2:20 says beautifully that the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” In other words, the Church is built upon the Word of God, written down by the apostles and the prophets. The giver of that Word is Christ Jesus Himself, and the Word is given to point to Christ Jesus Himself. His Word is the measure and final authority for the Church; as long as the Church is built upon Christ and His Word, it is true; and it is truly the house of God.

The second word Peter uses is “capstone”. The capstone, another vital part of construction. Doorways and windows were constructed with arches, and the very top stone was the capstone or keystone. Once the braces were removed from the arch, the weight of the archway and the wall all fell upon the capstone. If the capstone was correctly shaped, placed and strong, then the arch would hold. If the capstone was poorly designed, misplaced or flawed, the archway would fall—along with the wall, and perhaps the whole building. In our text, Peter declares that Jesus is not just the cornerstone of the foundation, but the capstone as well. It is not only that He had to be around at the beginning for the groundbreaking and early construction of the Church, but has since then moved on to other projects. He remains with the Church: as the capstone, He holds it up. He keeps it from falling and disintegrating. He who bore our sins still bears the load so that your yoke may be easy and your burden light.

Thus, the Church is both **founded** and **sustained** by Jesus Christ. There’s one more stone, though: there’s the *scandalon*, the stone that people trip over—the one that causes offense. When Isaiah 8 speaks of the stone of offense, it says that the Lord of hosts is the stone, and that those who trip over Him will be broken. Peter here confirms, then, that Jesus is the Lord of hosts and able to accomplish His will; however, for those who reject Him, there’s no getting around Him into heaven by some other means. Reject Christ, and you’re going to be broken.

These three stones are a wonderful complement to our Gospel lesson, in which Jesus declares, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” Note that He doesn’t say, “I’ve come to show you the way, and you’ll be saved if you walk along the same path well enough.” No, He says, “I am the Way: if you’ve got Me, you’ve got eternal life.” He doesn’t say, “I’ve come to point you toward the truth you must find;” He says, “I am the truth: if you have Me, you have salvation!” He doesn’t say, “I’ve come to show you what you must do if you want to have life;” He says, “I am the Life: if you have Me, you have eternal life forever.” And He says, “No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Not, “I’m so vain that I won’t let anyone else save,” but “Apart from Me, there is no Savior, but I have died for all.”

There's similar comfort in the three stones of this text. Jesus is not a moving target, and salvation is not a matter of pursuing Him and trying to do enough to catch Him for your own. He's the cornerstone, unmoved and unmovable. His Word does not change. His salvation does not change. If you have Him, you have eternal life. If you try to get to the Father without Him, only then is He the rock on which you'll stumble and be broken.

## II. What of You?

Put yourself in the shoes of the first Christians to hear this text from Peter. You know stones and buildings well, and the most famous in your experience is the temple in Jerusalem. At the moment, it still stands; but before His death, Jesus prophesied that the time would come when the temple would be destroyed, without one stone left upon another. That time came just a handful of years after Peter writes this text. Remember, the chief priests and leaders rejected Jesus and had Him crucified: they refused to believe He was the Messiah. Thus, they rejected the cornerstone—He was a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to them. Because they rejected Jesus, they turned to other messiahs instead: not saviors from sin, but nationalists who want to rebel against Rome. Just a few years after Peter writes this epistle, Rome has had enough. It sends armies to Jerusalem, and the city falls after a horrific siege. The soldiers meticulously dismantle the temple. The identity of the Jews as a people is tied to the temple: if the Romans destroy the temple, they go a long way to erasing their identity: the Jews go from being the “chosen people” to “not a people,” and those who survive are scattered. Does this mean that God has forsaken the world? What of those who trust in Christ?

For those shell-shocked by the destruction, this text gives great hope: for Peter says, “As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 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” (1 Peter 2:4-5). The Lord is building a new temple: not one of stones constructed by human hands, but His Church. The cornerstone, chosen and precious, has been laid by Jesus’ death and resurrection. His people are built upon Him like living stones; and to them Peter writes, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

With Jerusalem wiped out, one might wonder if God has any patience left. The chosen people are obliterated. But Peter says, “You are a chosen race.” This is not by lineage or ancestry, but by the promise of grace: both Jews and Gentiles who trust in Christ for salvation are now the people of God.

“You are a royal priesthood,” says Peter. The temple in Jerusalem is gone, its priests slaughtered and the sacrifices there discontinued. But the sacrifices there are no longer needed, because Jesus has been sacrificed for the sins of all. Now, you are a royal priesthood: for the sake of Jesus, it is given to you to draw near to God. It is given to you to offer the only sacrifice that is left: a sacrifice of praise, proclamations of what Jesus has done and a life lived in gratitude for it. This is a present reality: you are not auditioning in the hopes that you will earn a place in the royal priesthood of God; rather, for the sake of Jesus, the Lord declares that you are in His royal priesthood even now.

Thus, you are also “a holy nation, a people for His own possession.” You are not strangers or foreigners in the kingdom of God. For the sake of Jesus, you are His people. He has marked you as His own by

water and the Word, and He continues to sanctify you. And what do you do as a holy nation? You “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Called, not will call. You are already numbered among His people.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” When the Romans dismantled the temple, the Jews who were left effectively became “not a people.” But Peter writes, “Now you are God’s people;” and your identity isn’t built upon a stone temple or a flag or a piece of land that can be taken away. It’s built upon Christ who cannot be moved, promised you in His Word which will not pass away. This is not your doing: it is yours because you have received mercy.

It’s true whether you’re in the shoes of the first Christians to hear this text from Peter, or alive 2000 years later. While the devil will use every trial to persuade you that you are far from God and God is far from merciful, you know better. You are built upon Christ. You are numbered and named among God’s people. It is not your doing, but it is yours forever. Where you may grow frustrated or despair, repent; for God has already called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. For Jesus’ sake, it is given to you now: you are a chosen race. You are a royal priesthood. You are a people for God’s own possession. Because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen