

A TALE OF TWO STONES

PSALM 118:14-24
MARK 6:1-8

A SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY
APRIL 5, 2015
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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It has been forty six years since I first preached on an Easter Sunday. Easter Sunrise service, Central Park, Louisville, Kentucky, and there was snow on the ground! I stood there with the snow soaking through my good Sunday shoes. I should have known they wouldn't shovel the sidewalk on Easter Sunday! I've missed one Easter, I think, the year I was retired. So forty five Easters, and probably over a hundred Easter messages, because many of those years I was preaching two or three services, including sunrise and evening services.

It would have been so easy just to dip into the barrel of sermons. There's nine years of sermons in my computer. Twenty six years in the library of the Arcadia church.

But in good conscience, I could not do that. And so I looked for a new and fresh approach, a different angle, a different way to come at the message that is new every year, but part of the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

I've focused on Mary Magdalene, on the other women, on Simon Peter, and the Beloved Disciple that out-raced him to the empty tomb. I've talked about the angels who attended the empty tomb even as they attended the stable at Bethlehem in Judea.

But I've never talked about the stone. Two stones, really. Our Old Testament lesson introduced us to the stone that the builder's rejected, and the Gospel speaks of the stone at the tomb.

So today, a new sermon, a new teaching: a tale of two stones.

The first stone is legendary. When they were building the temple of Solomon, the stones were quarried miles away, and hauled on carts or sleds to the hill where the temple would stand. The stones were rectangular blocks, hewn so that they would fit together as closely as possible, almost interlocking. Just a little mortar and they would stay in place forever. Or at least until the armies of the enemies of the Jews knocked them down.

One strangely shaped stone arrived one day. It wasn't a keystone, like a wedge-shaped trapezoid that fit at the top of a Roman arch, to hold everything together. There were no Roman arches in a Hebrew temple! It wasn't a capstone, or a lentil. It had two arms at a ninety degree angle, and a third arm or leg dropping down also at a right angle. It wasn't a cornerstone, and frankly, the masons didn't know what to do with it so they rolled it down the hill into the pile of debris that had accumulated over the years as the temple was taking shape.

When the two walls the masons were erecting began to intersect, they could not figure out how to tie them together. So they called the architect, the one who drew the plans and knew everything, and he came to the job site. He took one look and said, "Where is the head of the corner?"

"The what?" the masons asked.

"The head of the corner, the stone that holds the walls together. It has one arm like this and one like that and a leg dropping down."

The masons laughed. "O, so that's what that was. We rolled it down the hill!"

And so, the stone that the builders rejected became the head of the corner, and held the walls of the temple together.

Isaiah knew the story, and referred to it. The psalmist knew the story, and put it in Psalm 118.

Jesus knew the story, and the gospels recount that he used it to compare Himself, for He would be despised and rejected, and then lifted up, and glorified.

When Peter preached his great sermon, full of the Holy Spirit, in Acts 4, he said: "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you..."

And again, in his first letter, Peter refers to this stone as precious, the stone that the builders rejected that has become the very head of the corner, and a stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

Jesus, the rejected stone, becomes the thing that ties all other things together.

But before that teaching was fulfilled, there is the story of the other stone, the one that sealed the door of the tomb. We think of it as a big round stone like a mill-stone, and see it depicted with a groove in the rock for it to roll in. But in truth, it may have been just a big boulder, just a big, heavy rock that the soldiers rolled over the hole in the side of the hill where they had laid the body of Jesus to rest.

The women were rightly concerned as they approached the tomb on that first Easter. Who will roll away the stone? Who can remove the rock? Strong soldiers, guards put it in place, to stay there forever. Who can move such a stone?

One of the theological questions that seminarians might ask themselves is this: can God make a rock so heavy that even He can't move it? And the answer is, "If God wants to." And if God wants to make a rock so heavy that even He can't move it, and then wants it moved, that rock will move! Because God is all powerful, God is almighty.

And the proof of God's power and might is not that the stone was rolled away from the tomb!

The proof of God's power and might is that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! The proof of God's power and might is that the tomb is empty! The proof of God's power and might is that sin and death are conquered.

And the tale of two stones, one rejected and one rolled away, tells us the message of Easter: That God has raised up Jesus from the dead. The man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, despised, rejected, crucified, dead, and buried, has been raised up, and in His resurrection is our hope and our promise of eternal life.

And to Him be the glory, the power, the dominion, and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more, Amen.