

# “On (the) Rocks”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 3, 2009*

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I John 3:16-24

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 4:1-12

Wouldn't it be ironic if Rock Hudson had played an archeologist in a movie; or odd to see Stone Phillips doing investigative reporting about rock-climbing; or strange to watch a film where Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson goes after villainous stone masons?

That is how surreal it might have seemed in Jerusalem when – in the weeks following Jesus' death – Peter is brought to testify before the Sanhedrin: the Jewish high court. Peter, known at the start of the gospels by his given name Simon, had been re-named by Jesus as “the rock,” implying strength and purpose. And yet, this Peter, who had been one of Jesus' closest and most trusted disciples, was also the man who denied Jesus three times on the eve of his death. But then, soon after, while fishing on the lake, the risen Jesus had appeared to him and given instructions to him saying: “feed my lambs...tend my sheep... feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-17)

“This Jesus,” Peter boldly proclaims to his accusers, “is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone;” (Acts 4:11) borrowing a quotation from Psalm 118. Notice, though, that Peter adds his own commentary that well-known verse; “by you,” he tells them; Jesus – the cornerstone – was rejected “by you,” the leaders of his own people, his own faith. Now they were also rejecting acts performed by other stones – like Peter – because they were done in the name of he who became the cornerstone.

Peter had denied Jesus before his death, but was accepted and transformed by Jesus through his resurrection. “So now, in light of forgiveness, Peter can boldly proclaim Jesus as the Anointed One of God and can heal the sick in his name. He doesn't seem to care any more about the fact that his life might be in jeopardy. They had been forbidden to teach the teachings of Jesus, but in light of all that has happened to Peter and the rest of Jesus' followers, Peter says he can no longer shut up. Peter says he can no longer run away. He's on a mission. He has focus and he does what he is sent to do.”<sup>1</sup>

Today's reading begins on the afternoon before. Peter and John had been arrested and then jailed overnight because of the uproar which had been caused that day. For, a crippled man, a beggar, was healed at the gates of the Temple by Peter and John, who were walking by on their way to pray. What Peter will – in his defense – portray as a “good deed,” the Jewish leaders saw as a threat because it generated more talk about resurrection from the dead. And not only that, it caused an increased interest in this man Jesus – the one they had taken care of on the cross – but whose number of followers had only grown and grown since then.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Berry-Bailey, “Everyday People”

And so, Peter is asked by his accusers, “by what power or by what name do you do this?” (4:7) Their word power – *dynamis* in Greek – now implies not only strength, but also movement: as in the dynamic movement of Jesus’ followers who no longer hide themselves in an upper room, and the movement of the Holy Spirit which descended upon them at Pentecost and now empowers them to perform these miraculous acts.

The power of the Holy Spirit that Peter cites before the council is not one that runs away from challenges, but that allows Jesus’ followers to be placed in the midst of controversy – even placed in jail – without fear. Peter has allowed himself to truly become a rock placed above the cornerstone, building the church in their midst. And the church is based upon the foundation of healing: like a crippled man given the ability to walk; like sinners being granted salvation by the grace of God.

Peter’s boldness – which has been evident throughout the gospels: remember, he is the one who walked on the water with Jesus and first proclaimed him as Messiah – his boldness now leads him to offer what is one of the most profound, and also one of the most controversial, statements in all the New Testament. In verse 12, Peter says to the members of the council, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

According to religious historians, there are today over 10,000 different world religions. Fifteen of those world religions have over one million adherents. “Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all famous for their ‘radical monotheism;’ they all teach that their religion alone is right about the one true God. But Shinto and many of the African religions are polytheistic, Buddhism is non-theistic, and forms of scientific materialism are atheistic”<sup>2</sup>; so we know that Christianity is not the only path people take to seek God.

And yet, here is Peter, confronting the most prominent leaders of his own Jewish heritage, claiming that there is no other way to salvation except through Jesus. The power that was used to heal the crippled man came not through Peter’s enlightenment, nor by some skill he had acquired, but by God working through his own salvation. He was a sinner who had been forgiven; he was a lost sheep who had been found. He was a rock that had been placed upon the cornerstone of Christ, the only foundation upon which he could have experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in his life and in the life of those who needed healing.

Theologian Walter Wink says: “if “saved” means being united and reconciled with God, then Acts 4:12 is palpably false. There are many authentic roads to God, and no religion holds the franchise for illumination. But if “saved” means being delivered from bondage, and being empowered to set others free--if it means transforming lives and renouncing domination in all its forms--then Jesus is indeed the one who can yet save the world. And that, it seems to me, is a factual statement with which persons of all religions might agree.”<sup>3</sup>

Because of the growing conversation and interaction between members of the world religious; because of the complex web of faiths that share characteristics of piety and charity and

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Clendenin, “The Only Way to the Only God?”

<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink, “Those Obstreperous Idiots” in *Christian Century*, 1994

adherence to the Golden Rule, many people have accepted pluralism as the highest religious ideal. And yet, a pluralism that treats all religions as equally valid comes at the unacceptably high price of endorsing evil as well as the divine. In truth, most people do not and should not believe that "all religions are true," which is to say that they think that consistent pluralism is wrong because some religions are false.

Did Peter go too far in his claim that salvation must come through Christ? If we, as Christians, believe that the power of God in Christ is true, and that at least some of the other world religions are false, does it mean that salvation might come from some other path? Should we, in humility, question Peter's bold claim about the exclusive power for salvation through the name of Jesus? How does the universal love of God fit together with a particular salvation through Christ?

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity* wrote, "Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and have been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."<sup>4</sup>

Peter, the rock, knew that salvation – for him and for those who had seen and heard Jesus – came only through Jesus, the cornerstone. In speaking so boldly to the religious council, he was willing to be where God placed him, trusting that God would use him well. In proclaiming that salvation must come in the name of Jesus, he was saying only what his Lord and Savior had taught him: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." (Matt. 13:16)

We are called to be his witnesses: to see and to hear, and to build upon the cornerstone that has been laid for us. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Dan Clendenin in "The Only Way to the Only God?"