

SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:5-11

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.”

SERMON: “The Beloved Community: Soaring up from the Cornerstone”

If you have ever had the chance to go to the center of Moscow, you will find a most fascinating building. It is a structure of contrast and even conflict, one side starkly different than the other – their height, their style, their color and adornment completely going in two different directions. The first time that I saw that building I was with my teacher, a beautiful, amazing woman named Vera. I asked her about the building, because there was something jarring about its presence. There was something even somewhat uninviting, even though both sides on their own were interesting enough. Together it just didn’t work.

This is the story she told me, or at least I think she did, because she told it to me in Russian. She said that it was constructed, like many of the grand buildings in Moscow, during the time of Joseph Stalin. According to what she said, he had gathered architects together to build a hotel. Not just any hotel – a grand hotel – to impress everyone who came from outside Russia to see. He told them exactly what he wanted and sent them off to come up with ideas. Those architects took his ideas, and brought back plans to present to him. And according to her story, he made a decision, a clear decision. One architect remembered that Stalin had decided on his plan. Another architect said no, no, no, I was there, I clearly remember he decided on my plan.

And suddenly, they were terrified. Their knees began to shake, because they knew they could not go back to Stalin because Stalin, history tells us, was not exactly a kind or caring person. They knew what would happen to them if they either went back, because that would show they weren’t listening, or if they built the wrong building. And so they decided they would at least get part of it right. So they built this one building – no, these two buildings. They built them out of fear and terror and dread. They stand to this day as a testament to what can happen when fear, rather than love, is the starting point for any building project.

Peter had every right to be terrified. He had every right for his knees to shake and to wonder what his own future would look like. Our story, you see, comes just after the reading from last week. Do you remember how Peter had astounded all the people by healing a man who had been disabled since birth. Do you remember that Peter then astounded everyone further by boldly giving this very testimony that he gives again today: the story of who Jesus was, how he matters, how he was rejected by the people, crucified and risen. And do you remember last week he made that space for grace. He told the people to repent and that God would send Jesus right to them.

Grace and life and hope breaking forth. And do you remember what happened after that testimony of deed and word? Well, the Bible tells us that 5,000 people – or again, just lots and lots and lots of people – believed. Which is to say they found hope. Which is to say they dedicated their lives to following.

What also happened is that this impressive list of leaders on display in today's reading got awfully nervous. And so they arrested Peter, they locked him up. And you see, Peter knew what happened to Jesus -- the one in whose name he is proclaiming all this -- after Jesus got locked up. So you can't blame him for being downright terrified. And as if that night in jail wasn't bad enough, the story tells us that when Peter was let out the next morning, he was intentionally brought forth in front of *all* the leaders, those scribes and teachers, and then that list of names that John read for you in today's Scripture, a who's who of high priests and in fact the whole family, *everyone* of power and significance was there, some of them involved in the very trial of Jesus himself. And so you can't blame Peter if his knees were shaking a bit, standing there in front of *all* of that power.

Except Acts tells us that a whole different kind of power suddenly came upon Peter, something that I think made his knees stop shaking, his back get straighter, and his voice get more resonant. The power, you remember, like the rush of the wind, like flames dancing on your head, the power of the Holy Spirit gives Peter the courage to hold on, and more than that, to carry on. I love his speech this morning because he speaks the truth of what happened. But you notice, and even as John read it, there's no animus, there's no hatred in this. There is simple, undeniable truth being told.

He tacks one thing onto the end of these words and his testimony, words about a cornerstone. They were not words he made up. They are words taken directly from Psalm 118. You know that psalm. It begins "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!" It is a psalm that asks all of Israel to proclaim that truth for moments just like this one. In verse 6 it says "With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?" He was asking the beloved community to remember God's goodness for their whole life, so that no matter what they faced that they would need fear truly nothing at all. It echoes that ancient Biblical truth that we never stand alone. And then finally it turns to verse 22 in the words that Peter draws: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

In Peter's voice, I don't hear anger or even defiance, but rather compassionate truth. Yet another invitation to the people to remember the truth at stake and to repent, to turn and follow. For the beloved community of that time built their community up and around and over that cornerstone. And as a result, that beloved community was strong and true.

Cornerstones. In ancient times, they were critically important in construction, especially in larger edifices meant to stand the test of time. You see, that cornerstone was the first stone placed. And it needed to be done just right. It needed to be perfectly square. For from the stone both the vertical and horizontal aspects of the building took shape. It was from that cornerstone that the building sprang out and up. It was the level place from which all subsequent lines found their truth. A warped cornerstone, well, leads to walls that won't last. Another feature of that cornerstone is that apparently – and I don't completely understand the physics of this – the

gravitational force of the building is forced down and through that stone. As I understand it, a weak cornerstone leads to buildings that do not endure. Choosing the right cornerstone is critically important, for it shapes the whole project and determines its ultimate fate.

Over time, as architectural and building processes evolved, that cornerstone has become less functional and more decorative. It has become bigger and fancier, yet less involved in the building's ultimate purpose. Often those stones are made out of beautiful or precious materials. They are often hollowed out to hold artifacts or time capsules in them. They are designed to draw your eye far more than the weight of the building.

Every day this week, I went out and I spent time with the cornerstone of our church. I explored it, I looked at it, I tried to dig behind it. And it was a real joy, actually. That cornerstone, laid almost 200 years ago, in fact is the most visible spot on the front of the sanctuary as you approach it down the sidewalk and past the memorial garden. Before you get to the front doors, it is the first architectural feature of this wonderful place that catches your eye. And this week it got me thinking a bit as to whether that cornerstone serves more of the ancient kind of purpose, the kind Peter's evoking, or the more modern kind of function. Truth be told, despite all of my exploration, I don't have a conclusive answer, although there are some clues. I invite you to come to the church and see for yourself and tell me what you think. Is that stone at the heart and strength of who we try to be as church? Or is it window dressing?

I'm far less concerned with that question in regards to the structure of this church building than I am in regards to the structure of our church family. It is a serious question for us to consider. The ancient beloved community -- that one based on caring and sharing, the one that's transformed and transforming -- despite the thousands that were coming to it, they had nothing near this structure in which to worship. But it absolutely had based the shape and strength of the community, of the gathering of the body, squarely and securely on the birth, life, teachings, healings, service, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Anointed One. Not and never as window dressing or ornamentation, but as the direction and lines for how those people were going to reach out and reach up, how they would bear the loads of their challenges in that place and time.

I think it bears good and deep contemplation for us in our own place and time as to whether Jesus is our anchor and direction, our source and destination of both who we are and the path we follow, whether his story is our story, or whether Jesus has just become fancy window dressing, designed to impress those who walk on by, catching the eye even if it doesn't grab our heart. Truth be told, there is no conclusive answer. But in largest part, for it is not an answer that can ever be finally or simply arrived at and asserted, but instead it is an answer that requires being remade in every decision we make. I do think, by the way, this flock gives off plenty of clues as to which direction we are leaning. And for that, I am grateful.

This week in our Disciples Bible Study, we finally made it to the gospel stories. And we started with Mark, the oldest of them. What struck me is that one of the participants reacted with both surprise and joy, with that same astonishment as the people of Jerusalem. She has been a member of this church for some time. She has sung plenty of hymns about Jesus. She has heard plenty of sermons, too. And yet reading Mark's gospel all the way through, meeting Jesus more deeply

and fully, she found herself, just like the people of Jerusalem, utterly astounded. Astounded at his teaching and the gentle wisdom behind it, astounded at his retreats into creation to pray and think, astounded at his character and balance. She was drawn to Jesus in powerful ways, finding, she said, a sense of cohesive wholeness that transcended any single story she had ever heard.

In preparing for worship this week, in thinking about this passage and about Jesus as a cornerstone, how Jesus calls us to live and act, to be and testify, there were a number of core things that kept returning to my mind. I want to share just three of them with you.

First is what Peter is reflecting both last week and this, and quite frankly what he will reflect again next week too, and that is this: Jesus the cornerstone, the strong, gentle, committed, compassionate truth teller, never shying away from addressing the real issue. Yet also never for his own power or aggrandizement, but rather for the good of the whole and the whole of the good. There is that hymn, “Lord, Speak to Me,” that captures this so clearly. The first line goes like this: “Lord, speak to me that I might speak in living echoes of thy *tone*.” So as we see compelling issues in the world, as we come face to face with issues of racism and injustice, of inequality and exclusion. As we deal with differences and arguments both outside and inside of our beloved community, may we build our response on the cornerstone of Jesus. Not just in the words or texts that we utter, but in the *tone* of strong, loving, humble, truthful testimony.

Second, in my own understanding of Jesus, I see a Jesus who enjoys the fullness and gift of life, who delights in relationship and abundance. And yet doesn't just make time for the oppressed or the struggling, but always makes them his focus. Not just peripherally, but centrally. He eats with them. And too often I think we imagine that he eats with them for their benefit. I think Jesus eats with them to learn from them, for his benefit, too. He sits for long periods of time with those who are struggling. In John's gospel he sits with Nicodemus in the middle of the night for 21 verses to engage in conversation. In the very next chapter he sits in the heat of the day with a Samaritan woman at the well for 42 verses. Jesus commands the children to come to him. And he does not stop healing until everyone has been made whole. He feeds them all, no matter how many thousands. Jesus, you see, uses his most precious resources – his limited time, his blessings of abundance – on the needy, the outcast, the lonely, the distressed. So as we see compelling issues in the world -- times when Asians are being targeted for unspeakable abuse and violence by people in this country, when transgender children are being targeted by lawmakers of this country, when vaccines are given out unevenly, where gun violence is tearing communities apart -- we need to decide how to dedicate our precious resources of time and treasure and talent, not just to do the things that we want, but also even and primarily to address the needs of the very real people who are struggling under the weight of this world.

Third, maybe because of the passage last week where Peter talked about God sending Jesus the Christ to every one of us, or maybe because the gospel of Mark that we're studying right now has Jesus always on the move, I see one who doesn't just welcome all to come to him (although he does), but one who always seeks to go out to seek those who for whatever reason can't, don't or won't. Oh, Nicodemus came to him, but Jesus went to the Samaritan woman. Jesus traveled both inside and outside of Israel to talk and to teach. He noticed those who were struggling and he sought them out. He sent his disciples out with nothing to go and minister. He even invited over to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. Jesus went. So as we see the compelling issues in our world

– grief and loneliness, hunger, depression, communities devastated by climate change, natural disaster or human violence – may we see them with open eyes, just like Jesus did, and go to them. To bless and be blessed, to testify and learn, to go humbly like Jesus not to fix but to be with and serve, and watch the fixing just happen.

When you look at that hotel in Moscow today, there is a sense of disconnect. I found that I was even repulsed a bit by the jarring contradictions. And it was a building I really didn't want to approach. And I think that that reflects less about the actual architectural appeal of the building, and more about the person who caused two different conflicting cornerstones to be set. Maybe it's the fear that went into the construction of that structure designed to impress that lingers on in its very existence.

Friends, the One who calls us to build the beloved community in our time, the hymn says "He is most wonderfully kind." The One who served as the cornerstone of that beloved community that so filled with the Holy Spirit soared to meet its moment, is right here with us now in worship. I am deeply touched by the ways this community tries to live into our calling in tangible ways. As we do so with every project, with every breath, with each new day, may we study the cornerstone of our church. No, not that beautiful piece of marble at 4 Main Street. But the even more beautiful Jesus. That in how we treat each other within the church and how we treat our brothers and sisters beyond the church, that no matter what the moment or circumstance, no matter the issue or storm, the beauty of Jesus and his way and his life is what not only draws eyes to this place, but hearts deeply into the costs and the joys of discipleship.

Friends, may it be so. Amen.