

# From Common Stones to Cornerstones

A sermon based on John 20:19-31, Acts 5:27-32 and Psalm 118:14-29

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Wednesday evening, after attending the Vespers of Love Easter service at the Greek Orthodox Church, I returned home and turned on the television, only to witness the most imbecilic show ever broadcast! One moment I was in a church, immersed in Byzantine art and liturgy; the next moment I was watching something called, "The Weakest Link". From the sublime to the ridiculous! In less than an hour!

I have managed, until now, to avoid what our noble networks call reality programming, and it hasn't been difficult. If this be reality, dear God, give me the surreal! If you're not familiar with the "Weakest Link," the show pits seven contestants against one another in a quiz show format. A nasty quizmaster instructs the group that they must expel one person after each round of questions, until only two contestants are left to battle it out for the great intellectual prize—money! Each contestant gets to utter something nasty to justify his or her vote, whereupon the host snaps at the one voted off the show: "You are the weakest link. Good-bye." And the camera follows the expelled one as he or she departs the studio via "the walk of shame."

Apparently the show is a British import, but as far as I'm concerned stupidity dressed up with a British accent is still stupidity! The rude and condescending host, attempting to come off as witty, only succeeded by half, and if anything she reminded me of the missing link! I switched the television off after only two expulsions, but as you can see I've already captured the spirit of the show, which is essentially the theatre of cruelty and humiliation. And a shallow attempt, at that, for the questions asked tax only the contestants' knowledge of television culture.

I can remember shows like "Reach for the Top," in which high school students were asked questions about history, literature, science, and current events, and though one team eventually won you could not help but admire both teams, admire the way they operated as teams, and feel good about the honour they brought to their respective schools and communities. However, if this be the price of progress, how dare we resist it?

## Which Disciple was the Weakest Link?

Jesus' disciples also voted among themselves, but when they gathered sometime after the resurrection to vote it was not to expel a disciple; they voted to include a disciple, to replace one who had expelled himself! (Acts 1:12-26) Truth be told, it would be difficult to determine which of the disciples was the weakest link; they were all rather shaky. Last Sunday I mentioned the clues left at Jesus' tomb suggesting something other than body-snatching, but Peter and another disciple could not, for the life of them, put the puzzle together. "Clueless in Jerusalem" would have been an appropriate title for that gospel story.

In today's gospel story, the disciples don't fare much better. The first scene in today's story finds the disciples huddling together behind locked doors, in fear of reprisals. (John

20:19) It's hard to believe that this group will form the nucleus of the Christian church. Cowering in fear, hoping no one will find out where they are, they are not an impressive lot. Scared, disheartened, defensive, and sealed off from the world at large, this is not what one of those perky church advertisements might describe as "The church with a warm heart and a bold mission!" This is a group of Christians with sweaty palms and a timid spirit!

The New Testament compares the church to a temple built of "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5), but the terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door does not strike me as great building material for a temple of God! They are more like those throw-away stones you skip across the water, only to watch them to sink into oblivion after the last skip.

The events of Holy Week disoriented and demoralized the disciples. Any insight and courage they may have gained during the regular discipleship season was scarcely in evidence during the discipleship play-offs! If John Roth had been in charge of this motley crew, there would, no doubt, have been some expulsions. The weakest links, or at least the unnecessary ones, would have to go! And for some, Simon Peter would be a prime candidate. His record was spotty, at best. When, for example, Jesus asked the disciples to indicate who he was, Peter was quick to answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." A good answer! And Jesus praised Peter for his insight. When Jesus went on, however, to lay out the implications of Peter's answer, talking of suffering and death, Peter interrupted and, in effect, demanded that Jesus be a different kind of Messiah! Which earned him one of Jesus' sternest rebukes!

Peter wasn't a very polished disciple. His attempts at Christian living were awkward, and even at the Last Supper, when it was very clear that conflict lay ahead, Peter's declaration of loyalty was an octave too high! Almost as high as the cock's crows that accompanied his denials. Then there was the foot-washing incident, the water-walking incident, the falling-asleep-in-the-Garden-of-Gethsemane incident, as well as the unfortunate incident with the soldier's ear at the time of Jesus' arrest.

Peter, however, is not the main character in today's gospel story. It's Thomas. And Thomas might also qualify for the "weakest link" walk of shame. In fact, he wasn't even there when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. If Thomas wasn't the weakest link, he was certainly the last link in the chain of communication, for Mary Magdalene was the first to exclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18) Thomas was nowhere to be found. Then, later, when other disciples joined in the Easter refrain, "We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:25) Thomas was gone again. Thomas was the Tommy-come-lately in the group, and it was a full week later that he was finally able to join the choir in singing their Easter song! Not only was Thomas absent at key moments, he also had some serious doubts. He told the other disciples, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (20:25)

Many modern Christians would like to canonize Thomas as the patron saint of their own skepticism, but the language John uses to describe Thomas' doubt and rejection is quite emphatic. The Greek word used indicates that the other disciples "kept on" telling Thomas—repeatedly, but without success. And the tone of Thomas' surly response would be more accurately rendered in English as "unless I jab my finger in ...his side, I will never believe."

So, if one of the disciples has to go, why not Thomas? It's one thing to have the doubt that Frederick Buechner calls the "ants in the pants of faith," those itches and twitches that keep our faith awake and moving; it's quite another to have a skepticism of Nietzschean proportions. Or, to use another analogy, some doubts are like worm holes in your faith, betraying its internal mushiness. We need enough doubt to irritate our assumptions, to disturb our expectations, and to keep our faith vital, but not so much doubt that our faith has the consistency and nutritional value of jello!

Perhaps Thomas was the weak link in the group. Or perhaps it was the Bobbsey twins, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the "Sons of Thunder", as they were called. They were the ones who asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hands when he came into glory. Star pupils, they were! On one occasion, they even asked Jesus to call down fire from heaven and consume an entire village of Samaritans! (Luke 9:54) The group of disciples might have been much better off without those two.

Then there was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, but since he was the one that brought Peter into the group, I wonder about him. In fact, one might be better off trading away the entire group! Few of them are very memorable. Matthew was one of those dreadful tax-collectors. Simon had the misfortune of having the same name as Peter, and was also under suspicion for violence at the world trade talks in Jerusalem. And Jude had the misfortune of having the same name as the one who betrayed Jesus; if he survived an expulsion vote, it would be a public relations disaster!

### **Who are These People Before the Sanhedrin?**

It strains one's credulity, then, to meet some of these same disciples in our reading from the Book of Acts. The conditions in Acts are no less fearful than the conditions in John's Gospel. Indeed, fear seems even more justified now, given that the disciples are dressed in prison garb, and appearing before magistrates who are rather exasperated with their fearless behaviour. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in (Jesus') name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." (Acts 5:28) Whereupon Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (5:29) A slogan that has echoed through centuries of courageous witness. It's hard to believe these are the same people we met at the end of John's Gospel! And the clash with authority in Acts, chapter 5, is not the only example of their bold behaviour. Earlier in Acts we are told that "many signs and wonders were done... (by) the apostles." (5:12) In fact, we are told that they were held "in high esteem" (5:13), that their numbers were swelling (5:14), and that their spiritual power had become so renown that some people carried their sick out into the streets, hoping that Peter's shadow might fall on them as he passed by. (5:15) The arrest and imprisonment of the disciples was no more effective in keeping a lid on their enthusiasm than was the stone rolled across the opening to Jesus' tomb! (5:18-26)

What happened to those timid disciples hiding away in a room behind locked doors? The question reminds me of a story of a psychologist, an engineer, and a theologian who went hiking in the woods, and when the weather turned nasty they found shelter in an old trapper's cabin. No one was home, the door was unlocked, and it got them out of the rain, but inside they found something very odd. A large, pot-bellied, cast-iron stove hung suspended high in the air by wires attached to the ceiling beams. The engineer, always curious about how things work, said to the others, "Now why, do you suppose, would the trapper suspend his stove so high off the ground?"

The psychologist thought for a moment and said, "It is obvious that whoever owns this cabin is so lonely and so isolated from human contact that he has elevated his stove so that he can curl up under it and vicariously experience a return to his mother's womb." Well, the engineer had an answer of his own; he said, "I believe that the trapper is practising laws of thermodynamics. By elevating the stove this person has discovered a way to distribute heat more evenly throughout the cabin." The theologian said, "I'm certain that raising the stove so high has religious meaning for the owner. Fire has long been lifted up as a powerful religious symbol." They continued discussing the matter, when the trapper returned home, and asked why he suspended his pot-bellied stove by wires from the ceiling, he replied, "Oh, that's simple! I had plenty of wire, but very little stovepipe."

Considering the amazing transformation of the disciples from John's Gospel to the Book of Acts, one might be tempted to offer complex explanations, but the truth is very simple. What happened? The resurrection! That's what happened. If death loses its power, there is no longer any reason for fear! And once the impact of the resurrection hit them, there was no stopping the disciples. When standing up to the authorities in Acts, Peter explained, "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus.... God exalted him ...as Leader and Saviour.... And we are witnesses to these things...." (Acts 5:30-32)

### **Common Stones Became Cornerstones**

The resurrection turned weak links into bold witnesses. The resurrection transformed men cowering in fear into men of courage. It turned pathetic cowards into men of principle. In the Gospels we hear them squabble, put each other down, vie for attention, fall asleep, doubt, deny, betray, and run away, and had they been contestants on that imbecilic television show they all would have taken the "walk of shame" out of Jerusalem. But they didn't take the "walk of shame"—they became the founders of a powerful movement that has given hope and meaning and vitality to millions and millions of people for centuries and centuries!

A minister, early on in his career, received a new church appointment, and the congregation held a reception for him on his first Sunday. During the reception, everyone came around to greet him except for one man who lingered at the back of the room. At the end of the reception, after everyone else had gone, the man came forward and simply stood there. The minister greeted him, and asked him, "What do you do here?" The man answered, "I look for the preacher's weaknesses." "Uh oh," thought the minister, "there's at least one in every congregation." Then the man added, "And I'm good at it! I'm good at finding weaknesses. But when I find them, that's where I get beneath him, and lift him up." (Zan W. Holmes, Encountering Jesus)

In today's culture the disciples would have been eligible for some kind of competency testing, but the resurrection transformed those weak-link, loser disciples into a strong chain of links that reaches all the way from a tomb outside Jerusalem to a church on Kilborn Avenue in Ottawa. Rather than rejecting those who are weak, or ineffective, or just plain annoying, the resurrection takes the weak and makes them strong. It's called a reversal of fortunes, and one cannot help but enjoy the irony of such reversals. For example, a member of my brother-in-law's family applied to Harvard Medical School as an undergraduate, only to be rejected. Some twenty years later, however, he headed up Harvard's neurology department, and he is now the Dean of the Harvard University Faculty of Medicine! (Joseph Martin)

The Book of Acts illustrates the reversal-of-fortunes theme when it points to the shift in the perception of Jesus, saying, "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, ...has become the cornerstone" (Acts 4:11), a saying it adopts from our reading in the Psalms, which reads: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." (Psalm 118:22-23) The common-stone/cornerstone refrain echoes throughout the New Testament, in Matthew (21:42), in Mark (12:10), in Luke (20:17), in Ephesians (2:20), and in 1 Peter (2:6). Easter is the ultimate reversal of fortunes, of death being swallowed up in victory!

The reversal-of-fortunes theme is not exclusive to the New Testament, of course. Consider Abraham and Sarah, who had children when they were seniors! Consider the victorious Gideon, who was, self-admittedly, from the weakest tribe of Israel, and he himself the least important member of his own family! (Judges 6:15) Consider the early Christians described by Paul in 1 Corinthians when he writes, "Consider (that) ...not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world... God chose what is weak... God chose what is low and despised in the world...." (1:26-28) God focusses, not on our deficits, but upon our potential in light of the resurrection.

We are witnesses to this astounding transformation in the life of the disciples themselves. These common stones became cornerstones of the Church. Thomas, a common stone mostly remembered as a momentary monument to doubt and skepticism, not only overcame his doubt, as recorded in today's Gospel, but went on to carry the gospel to India, where he was martyred for converting the wife and son of King Misdai. Martyrdom requires much more steel and resolve than the disciples had before the resurrection.

Bartholomew, another of the twelve, went on to preach in Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt. He and Philip are said to have been active in Hierapolis where their activity aroused the proconsul to such fury that he ordered both apostles to be crucified. They were nailed opposite each other so that each could see the other's suffering. At the end of the second century, Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, writing to Victor, Bishop of Rome, states that "Philip, ...one of the twelve apostles, died in Hierapolis, and so did two of his daughters.... And another of his daughters, after having passed her life under the influence of the Holy Spirit, was buried in Ephesus." Thus continues the tradition of courageous witness.

Then there's James, who became the first Bishop of Jerusalem, and was also martyred there. In fact, he was the first apostolic martyr. Unable to control the growth of the Christian faith by the means at their disposal, the religious leaders sought the help of Rome, finally persuading Herod to take a hand in destroying this new heresy. Herod selected James to become the first victim of his persecution, perhaps because of his noticeable leadership. However, the man who brought the accusation against James was so moved by the apostle's conduct at his trial that he asked to be accepted into the Christian faith!

John, another of the twelve, went on to found a whole bunch of churches in Asia Minor. Some think he also wrote the fourth Gospel, the three Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. Brought to Rome, tradition has it that by order of Emperor Domitian he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil, which he somehow survived, and was then banished to the island of Patmos. Even when he was old and so feeble that he had to be carried into church, John continued to preach. He once preached one of the shortest sermons ever:

"Little children," he said, "love one another, love one another, love one another, " and then sat down. Many went home disappointed, thinking him senile, while others realized that his simple message contained the heart and soul of the gospel.

And so the story continues. Jude preached the gospel in Judea, Samaria, Idumaea, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Libya, then suffered martyrdom in Armenia. Matthew didn't travel far, though there is a possibility that he later went to Ethiopia. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, preached the gospel in Greece, perhaps even in Russia. Though he lived to an old age, he too died a martyr's death. He was so successful in spreading the gospel that Maximilla, the wife of the Roman proconsul Aegeas, converted to the faith. Aegeas was so enraged that he ordered Andrew to lead the people in sacrifice to their gods. When Andrew refused, he was severely beaten, then crucified, and to prolong his death he was fastened to a cross with rope instead of the customary nails.

There are several more, but we can't forget Peter, a common and unpolished stone, yet it was of him that Jesus said, "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) It was Peter's vision, described later in Acts, that reversed lifelong sensibilities and opened the Church to Gentiles! It is believed that Peter, the one who denied Jesus, three times, suffered martyrdom in Rome along with others at the time of the persecution of the Christians by Nero. Clement of Rome, writing at the end of the first century, wrote that Peter, "after having thus borne testimony went to his well deserved place of glory," adding that he "became a shining example among us."

Amazing transformations! The good news of Easter is that there are no definitive competency tests. The power of God, that raised Christ from the dead, has conquered the forces within and without which seek to limit us. As the hymn tells it:

Tis the spring of souls today;  
Christ hath burst his prison.

("Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain," #265, Hymnal, A Worship Book)

Christ is risen!

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.