

Old Rocks, New Stones

*A sermon preached on Acts 4:5-12 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on April 22, 2018*

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me!”

I don't know about you, but this playground taunt was all the rage in my elementary school way back when. If my memory serves me correctly, its popularity peaked in my 3rd grade homeroom class. It was the classic comeback to all manner of taunts, taunts that were shared to all of us by all of us at some point: “You're ugly, you're stupid, you're annoying, nobody likes you.” To which we became practiced in saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me!”

I've lived a little since then, and I can say to you with confidence what you already know: sticks can probably scratch you, and stones sure can bruise you, but words... oh words can break you right in two.

You and I know that right? When we've heard “there's something I need to tell you,” and “we did everything we could,” we know that words shatter worlds. When we've been told “I'm sorry,” “I believe in you,” and “I love you,” we know that words can build you up. When we've said “help” or “thanks” or “wow,” we know that words can reorient us, turn us around, and set us right again. And in this season of Eastertide, when we experience and bear witness to words like “why do you look for the living among the dead,” and “he's not there,” and “peace be with you,” and “I have seen the Lord,” we know that words heal and save, transforming us from old life to all that which is made new.

I have to wonder if some thought of words were on the minds of Peter and John that day, as they awoke filled by the events of the day before. As was their custom, Peter and John had gone up to the temple to pray late in the afternoon. The most devout among the Jews were those who made a priority of 3:00 prayers, which also made them the likeliest candidates to give generously to the poor. Beggars knew this, of course, which is why they often planted themselves firmly by the temple gate at that hour for precisely that reason. But let's be clear — they were not allowed inside, especially not the beggar that Peter and John encountered that day.

Scripture tells us he was a man “lame from birth,” one “daily carried by people” who placed him “at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering.” It was there that the man asked Peter and John for money, as he did everyone who passed him by, but unlike all the rest, their response was different. “Look at us,” said the disciples, fixing their gaze upon him intently and saying, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

You could say that those were magic words; surely that's what some thought. But unlike “hocus pocus” or “expecto patronum,” Peter's words weren't magic, but rather spoken as ones with the authority that comes only from the Word made flesh, the *logos*, the One through whom all things were spoken into being: “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And he did.

Such words that turned weeping and lying and begging into walking and leaping and jumping were words that caused a seismic stir. Words that

prompted such utter astonishment among the people were words that would provoke the religious authorities to haul Peter and John to jail. For their testimony to the resurrected Christ had begun to catch fire — first a handful, then 120, then 3000, and now some 5000 had “heard this word and believed.”

Our text tells us that a crowd assembled in Jerusalem that next day, leaders and officials of all kinds waiting for those ordinary prisoners to stand before them, account for their declarations, justify their actions, and make clear the power that prompted them. Undeterred and filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter rose up on that new day to announce with resurrecting boldness¹ that through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and in his name, this sick man was healed and thus, *soteria* — salvation, healing, liberation, and wholeness — is available for us all. And quoting to these devout leaders the psalms they could say by heart, Peter said, “this Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.”

That, my friends, is a sermon in and of itself! But we mangle those words, don't we? And by we, I mean we who fill pulpits like this around the world, we who are granted a measure of authority to act on behalf of God, we who claim to speak in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... we preachers and ministers and religious leaders and Christians are often speaking at best, out of turn, or at worst, in vile offense to the God revealed in Jesus. Unlike Peter whose testimony was filled with the Holy Spirit, too often we who claim Christ speak filled with our own ego, our own self-righteousness, our own prejudices and fears and indifferences. Too often, our words carelessly

¹ Credit to Paul Baxley for his most meaningful sermon recently on “resurrecting boldness.”

force people beloved by God to sit outside the gates of our own construction. Too often, our words confuse creed with conviction. Too often, our words make criminals of immigrants, terrorists of Muslims, hysterics of women, heathens of those in the LGBTQ community, problems of the poor, and light the plight of the sick or the searching, the young or the unsure. Too often, we Christians put each other on trial, demanding to know under what authority or by which power we act and lead. Too often, our words fall short and silent in the face of injustice and suffering. Too often, our words are flung at one another and at ourselves like rocks and stones, wounding instead of witnessing, breaking down instead of binding up.

It's like Annie Dillard once said, "What a tragedy that so closely on the heels of Christ come the Christians."² That tragedy plays itself out time and time again within the context of our individual lives, when, in the words of 1 John that Augusta read for us today, "anyone has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help" or when we refuse to love God, love each other, and love ourselves in a big and bold way, a "laying down our lives" kind of way. When the name we claim is Jesus, but our words and actions betray his way of life that saves, heals, liberates, and makes all people whole, then we have failed to bear witness.

Or set within the context of the church, that failure of leadership happened when the priests, the Sadducees, the elders, the scribes, the rulers of the religious status quo demanded to know more about power and control that they themselves didn't mediate. It happens week in and week out as even the most well-meaning churches struggle to respond to needs all around

² A quote I learned from my dear pastor friends, and as quoted in this sermon on today's text here: http://day1.org/6533-by_what_power

them, especially to rhetorical threats in our culture that pit brother and sister against each other in fear. As pastor Tom Long wonders: “is the institution responsive to the Spirit, or is it curved in on itself? For whenever political or religious authorities set themselves up as the only legitimate broker of what people need and defend that authority, inevitably the Holy Spirit breaks down those structures.”³

And even set within the landscape of our particular church and its structures, we would fail if we confused the stones we erected to house our people and mediate the presence of God with the cornerstone of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We would fail if we waylaid our mission and ministry given to us by God in Christ because of a desire to cling to what has been, to what once was, to how we wish it would be, all out of scarcity rather than to open ourselves in radical abundance to what we might become. We would fail if we confused stones with the Cornerstone, words with the Word.

My elementary days taught me about sticks and stones and words, but also a story about the power of a stone to inspire and make whole. You know the one: *A kindly, old stranger was walking through the land when he came upon a village. As he entered, the villagers moved in fear towards their homes, quickly bolting the doors and windows. The stranger smiled and asked, ‘why are you all so frightened. I am a simple traveler, looking for a soft place to stay for the night and a warm place for a meal.’*

“There's not a bite to eat in the whole province,” they told him. “We are all weak and our children are starving. Better keep moving on.”

³ Tom Long, “Acts 4:5-12,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p432.

"Oh, I have everything I need," he said. "In fact, I was thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you." Out of his cloak, he pulled an iron cauldron, filled it with water, and began to build a fire under it. Then, with great intention, he drew an ordinary-looking stone from a silken bag and dropped it into the water.

By now, the rumor of food had spread, compelling most of the villagers to come out of their homes or watch from their windows. As the stranger sniffed the "broth" and licked his lips in anticipation, hunger began to overcome their fear.

"Ahh," the stranger said to himself rather loudly, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with cabbage -- now that's hard to beat." Soon a villager approached hesitantly, holding a small cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place, and added it to the pot.

"Wonderful!!" cried the stranger. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of salt beef as well, and it was fit for a king." The village butcher managed to find some salt beef . . . And so it went, through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on, until there was indeed a delicious meal for everyone in the village to share.

Amazed at what had transpired among them, the villager elder offered the stranger a great deal of money for the magic stone, but he refused to sell it and traveled on the next day. As he left, the stranger came upon a group of village children standing near the road. He gave the silken bag containing the stone to the youngest child, whispering to a group, "It was not the stone, but the villagers who brought about the transformation."⁴

⁴ Adapted from this rendering of "Stone Soup" found here: <http://www.dltk-teach.com/fables/stonesoup/mtale.htm>

This stone I dropped is one that I have on my desk and one that dots one of the framed pictures in my office. I've told you about it before. For in a Deacons retreat just days before I came to you to preach in view of a call, my colleague and minister Nina led us in a ritual as ancient as the stones themselves. For like Abraham and Sarah who built altars of stone to their experience of God amidst transition and change, we too were invited to create an altar of stone. These stones, though, bore our prayers: a word or two on each one, deepest and most honest petitions for the unknown road that unfolded ahead. As each leader dropped their stone into the bowl, we voiced aloud our prayer. *Trust. Spirit. Openness. Love. Unity. Generosity.*

And mine? Acutely aware of what I didn't yet know, of what paths we as pastor and people together might navigate, of what words of promise we would soon make together, the only word of a prayer I could muster was *courage*.

"Courage" the word has practically worn off, but the stone anchors my desk and reminds me daily of the spirit it bears. And now just beside it is this piece of our building which I held up to you nearly a year ago. It had fallen off our chapel facade as my kids played just underneath. Fortunately this stone didn't break any bones, but like its partner on my desk, it is one that bears the name 'courage' for what you its occupants are preparing to do. I can practically see it now — these old rocks will soon become new stones, ones that we'll use to build an altar marking what has been and celebrating what will be. These will be new stones that will fill our proverbial pot, not to be joined by carrots and potatoes and spices, but with words and actions like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and

self-control. And we'll say to each other, "the stones were not magic, but rather, it was these ordinary people acting by the prompting of God through the name of Jesus Christ under the power of the Holy Spirit which brought about the transformation."

For the One whose name was both Word and Stone offers for all the promise of new life — new life for individuals and institutions, new life that offers nothing short of salvation, healing, liberation, and wholeness. That's the kind of transformation that makes even the rocks cry out. And so I suppose — why not you and me too?