

An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church “The Stone the Builders Rejected”

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Acts 4

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Two people who spent a lot of time with Jesus have just healed a man who was lame from birth. A crowd gathers at the spectacle, so one of them tells them about the resurrection of Jesus and the power that has healed this man. And immediately 5000 people became believers and followers of Jesus. Must have been a good sermon. Add that to the 3000 in Acts 2 and you already have 8000 and possibly more that are turning to Christ. Good news for the early church. Bad news for the people who thought that by getting rid of Jesus, they would end this movement. Quite the opposite. It is growing. So employing the same strategy they tried with Jesus early on, they arrest Peter and John to intimidate them and instruct them to stop preaching and teaching, to keep quiet about all of this. And to answer the question, “Who has given you the authority to heal this man?” What an absurd question! But the question, ‘who’s given you permission to do this?’ is always the question of power when that power is threatened. Power thinks that it is the only legitimate authority to control and determine what happens. But at least 8000 people were discovering early on that there is a greater power than earthly power, there is a higher authority than temporal authority, there is a wisdom that is beyond the wisest of men, and there is a way of life that appears to be foolishness to some and weakness to others, but it is the wisdom and power of God.

So Peter, standing in front of the men by whose power Jesus was arrested and handed over to be crucified, courageously quotes Psalm 118:22, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” And that got me thinking about other stones, and our new building, and all the stone that’s about to be put up on it, and about construction in general. And about how damaging the judgment must be against a stone if it’s rejected—a stone that’s already been quarried, already been hauled to the job site. Now in the eyes of the builders—reject.

I freely admit I don’t know a lot about construction. I know a little. I worked construction for a couple of years. I’ve seen things built. I’ve swung a hammer a few times. Managed to saw a few boards and still have all my fingers. I’ve done a few projects around the house, but I don’t know a LOT about construction. Some people do.

Some people just know it like it’s in their blood. How a building gets built is just intuitive to them. Some people have the ability to see a set of architectural drawings and just intuitively know that nothing of what the architect dreamed up will actually work in the real world. That’s the first lesson of construction. The architect, engineer, contractor, subcontractor, and workman on the site are each convinced that none of the other people know the first thing about how a building gets built. That’s the first lesson. The second lesson is payday is Friday. That actually might be the first lesson.

The third lesson in construction is that you always think about the next step. How does what I do now affect what I have to do later? When you pour the foundation, it better be level or the framing lumber on the project won’t be straight, which means the walls won’t be square, which throws off the roof, etc. It’s a mess. Every step matters. The foundation matters to the finished job. And every piece of material matters. So construction workers’ minds are always

moving—moving forward to the future, moving side to side to take note of what’s happening around them. They are focused, intense, quite smart people.

So, like I said, I worked a couple of years doing construction most days. I worked under a retired contractor volunteering his time to help rebuild homes in South Florida from Hurricane Andrew. He was never happy. Never, ever happy. I was a 23-year-old single guy living in Miami. I was happy all the time (except when I was pining away for my fiancée back in Texas, of course). So one day an intern and I asked him about it after when we had finished a major step in a project and he still was displeased about something. We coyly challenged him, “Name one thing you are happy about right now.” Without missing a beat, he said, “I’m happy that you are actually working today and not loafing around like usual.”

We didn’t inquire anymore.

Construction workers have another sense about them. They don’t like to waste things. When you have to cut a board, cut the shortest one possible that will get the job done. Don’t waste. You’ll have scrap at the end of a project. You just will. But the goal is to have as little scrap as possible. This is part economic. You’ve paid for the whole board, so use as much of it as you can. It’s also an embedded virtue for doing a job right. You don’t make a mess of your project as much as you can help it. In America we are bit more careless than some other places when it comes to waste. We throw a lot of stuff away. And that’s a problem. Even on disciplined job sites, some things get thrown out. I’ve been on job sites in other countries where we literally picked up stray nails and pounded them back straight to be used again. Everything is used. On the Texas-Mexico border there are family dwellings—homes—that are made of discarded tin, cardboard, and chicken wire. People use everything. Nothing goes to waste. Waste nothing that is not totally, completely defective and useless to you. My kids in school are learning what builders have known for centuries: reduce, reuse, recycle. Almost everything can be used for something.

So all of this makes this description all the more curious. “The stone the builders rejected.” In the eye of the builders, the stone in question must have been so thoroughly defective, deficient, misshaped, misaligned, useless that they could find no reason to justify its continued existence as part of their building. There is some character to the stone that it offends the builders. This won’t go in my building. “Throw it in the rubbish heap.” “This one’s no good to us.” Reject.

Maybe it looked weak.

Maybe it was oddly shaped.

Maybe it didn’t look like the other stones.

Maybe it looked like if I include this stone, my whole carefully constructed edifice might crumble.

I suppose a stone might be rejected for different reasons. I know that people are. People sometimes judge other people to be worthless, useless, unwelcome. There are people whose experience in life has been one of constant rejection. They are outsiders who are either viewed to be weak, different, or dangerous. In a twisted bit of irony, people, made in the image of God, may be more likely to be discarded than a stone on a building site.

And this was Jesus. He lowered Himself to become human, and became a servant of humans, and then was obedient to God to death, even death on a humiliating cross. Consider His

humble birth, His servanthood in life, the people with whom He associated, His willingness to take on the establishment, His death. He was a stone rejected and despised, judged by the builders and architects of society to be worthless, if not dangerous, to the structure of their religion and society. Jesus' continued existence threatened to topple everything they built. When John and Peter and this man they had healed stand before the Caiphas . . . in Acts 4, they are standing in front of the men who sent Jesus to his death. The ones who determined His uselessness, His danger to the building.

So they rejected and killed Him.

But in His resurrection a great reversal happened.

What was low is brought high.

What was despised is made beautiful.

What was discarded is now prized.

What was useless is now indispensable.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the *kephalain gonias*. The head of the corner—the cornerstone, capstone, or keystone. It's a bit unclear here whether this means a cornerstone like a stone that ties two joining walls together, or whether it's a capstone over a doorway that compresses the other stones to keep them in place, or whether this means a keystone, which is the centerpiece in a vaulted ceiling, but you don't have to know a lot of Greek or a lot about construction to get what this means. Something, or someone, evaluated and discarded has now become integral. The stone is not just used. It's the one that really matters, the one because of which all the other stones fit into place and find their purpose.

Christ as the cornerstone means that He is the one on which we build everything else we build. A pastor I respect very much led his church over 40 years from a membership of 120 to over 20,000. It's not the numbers that are so impressive though. It's his character and integrity. He was asked once in an interview to describe the structure of the church. He replied, "We didn't change much from the very beginning. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Following His leadership, the elder board, pastor, staff, and other lay leaders follow." He went on to say, "I'm not really a visionary. I just tried every day to faithfully preach and teach the gospel. We spent most of our time trying to catch up to the growth that was happening to us. We didn't really try to grow. We just tried to follow Christ whatever happened." That's an important answer from someone who by all rights could have taken the credit for himself or focused the spotlight on their great programs or worship style or nice building. But he gets it. Those are nice parts to church. But church is about Jesus Christ. About knowing Him and following Him.

To know Christ as head of the church is to cultivate a life of prayer and listening to God. Not just from the staff, not just the leadership board, but from everyone.

To know Christ as head of the church is to be less anxious about the ebbs and flows of the church. We have a lot of exciting things happening here right now. But it's all God's. And if it were to disappear tomorrow, we would still have one another and we would still have Christ. Nothing that lasts would change.

To know Christ as head of the church is to be willing to risk something big for something good. The church is always at risk with every decision that is made. It is also at risk by every decision that is avoided. That's just the way church is. Church is always one generation from

disappearing. It's always been that way. It always will be until Christ returns. To trust Christ as head is to hold this good thing lightly and be willing to risk it all with joy.

To trust Christ as head of the church is to begin to see Christ as head of our lives. We are all building something—some kind of life. Is Christ your cornerstone? It's a good question because it determines what kind of building you are building. Is Christ the cornerstone of your dating relationships and of your marriage? Of your parenting? Of your finances? Is Christ the cornerstone of that which is being built up in you?

To trust Christ as head of the church is also to begin to see Christ the way the New Testament pictures Him, as not just head of my life, not just head of the church, but the universal keystone under which all of creation has its being.

Philippians 2:10, "Every knee shall bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father."

Colossians 1:15-18, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . He is before all things and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. That in everything He might be preeminent."

John 1:1-2, "He is the Word who was with God and who is God. The One through whom everything that was made is made."

Hebrews 1:2-3, "He is the heir of all things. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and upholds the universe by the word of His power."

I guess it's not so surprising that we would reject Him. His power makes us look weak. His wisdom makes us look foolish. His compassion makes us look hard-hearted. His courage makes us look timid. His love makes us look selfish.

So no wonder we would reject Him. He doesn't fit our little worlds that we so carefully construct like a house of cards. Of course, in rejecting Him we reject the true God and our true selves.

In finding Him, in allowing ourselves to be found by Him, we find that He never will fit neatly in our little worlds. If He is in your life, whether you feel misshapen, beaten down, crushed, useless, discarded, or despised, you become one more living stone in the universal temple of all creation giving glory to God.

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