

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Easter 5 (A) ~ 3 May 2026  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
1 Peter 2:1-10  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16  
John 14:1-14

***Stones, Not Rocks!***

*Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

The PBS series *All Creatures Great and Small* tells the story of the young veterinary surgeon James Herriot living in 1940s rural Yorkshire, in England. James is kind and earnest and would do anything to please his beloved wife, Helen – including trying to get into the good graces of Helen's father, Richard.

But poor James has (at least) three strikes against him in Richard's eyes: 1) he is Scottish, not English; 2) worse yet, he is from the city (Glasgow), not the country; and 3) he is not a farmer, like Helen and her whole family. These are not insignificant differences.

So James spends a fair bit of time and energy trying to impress his curmudgeonly father-in-law into accepting him...to the great amusement of Helen and her sister, Jenny.

There is a scene from the most recent season in which Richard is building a dry stone wall, which is to say one with no mortar to hold everything together. This is not as easy as one might think; there is no set of instructions, no blueprint, no architectural drawing to show the way. Creating a structure that is strong and will last is definitely more art than science.

But in his eagerness, James does not let his lack of experience prevent him from lending a hand. Richard comes along to discover James diligently placing stones in the wall, and he is less-than-pleased.

*What do you think you're doin'?* Richard barks.

*You said you needed help with the wall!* James responds, defending himself.

*Not with the putting!* Richard tells him. *Sorting is all you're good for...*

It turns out that, in Richard's economy of wall-building, there are three distinct tasks:

Sorting the stones – “Big, small, middlins, funny-shaped ones”

“Picking” (selecting precisely the stone needed in a particular spot)

and, finally,

“Putting” (placing the stones carefully in the wall).

As Helen explains to her confused and annoyed husband,

*You start off sorting, then picking, then after three or four years you get to the putting.*

James replies, in exasperation,

*I think I can manage to pick up a few rocks!*

(Do you hear how dismissive that sounds?)

Richard leaps to correct him:

*Stones! They're not rocks... You're picking up the stones.*<sup>1</sup>

Not rocks, but *stones*.

This is not an insignificant difference.

These stones have inherent worth, inherent value. They are part of something bigger – something with purpose.

There is such wisdom in this distinction.

In today's Epistle reading, the apostle Peter is writing to the early Christian communities in what is now Turkey, to give them confidence and courage and vision as they learn how to live as followers of Jesus. It isn't easy for them: Not only is Asia Minor quite a distance from Galilee and Jerusalem, where the Jesus Movement began, but it has been at least a generation since Jesus' death and resurrection.

*And...* For these new converts becoming a Christian means taking on something altogether new, altogether different from their roots. For them, to be Christian is to be truly counter-cultural: Even members of their own family, their own household, might not believe as they do. They face persecution at the hands of Rome. It is *risky* to claim their faith.

So Peter urges them to be “living stones... chosen and precious in God's sight,” stones that may be built into an impenetrable spiritual house. (Remember, Peter knows from rocks. Jesus gave him his name – *petra*, in Greek – “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt. 16:18). But here Peter uses the word “stone” – *lithos*, in Greek – to be used in building.) They are not just a heap of rejected rocks thrown randomly and carelessly on a pile, but rather they are hand-selected – “big, small, middlins', funny-shaped ones.” They are sorted and “picked” and carefully “put” together into a new structure built to last. They

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1155408425944711>

have inherent worth, inherent value. They are part of something bigger – something with purpose.

There is such wisdom here.

The Christians in Peter’s audience are so far removed, across time and geography, from the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that it would be easy to lose sight of where, exactly, they fit in the larger picture.

They never knew Jesus “in the flesh.”

They are living in very different circumstances from the earliest disciples.

What role do they have to play in the Jesus Movement?

Why bother?

We might well find ourselves asking these questions from time-to-time, too.

How do you and I fit into the ongoing story of God’s work in the world? How are you and I to contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God right here, right now?

First off, a little humility might be in order.

As much as we might like to think of ourselves as the stonemasons, as the artisans crafting our destinies, shaping the future of the world, we would be wise to think of ourselves as the stones – valuable, with inherent worth, but not the Artist.

But alas, the stones are not, ultimately, in charge. *God* is the stonemason, the artisan, the Master Builder.<sup>2</sup> We are the stones. We are not just a heap of

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<sup>2</sup> Attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, <https://www.romerotrue.org.uk/romero-prayer/>

rejected rocks thrown randomly and carelessly on a pile, but rather we are hand-selected – “big, small, middlins’, funny-shaped ones.” We have been sorted and “picked” and carefully “put” together into a new structure built to last. We have inherent worth, inherent value. We are part of something bigger – something with purpose.

Often we don’t see that worth in ourselves. *What do I have to contribute?* we might ask. *What role do I have to play in the Jesus Movement? Why bother?*

These are, ultimately, the wrong questions – understandable though they may be.

Do you remember who Jesus called as His first followers? Peter and Andrew and James and John were fishermen. Matthew was a tax collector. Judas may have been an accountant. None of their resumes exactly qualified them for the job at hand. Yet Jesus sorted and picked and placed them in His new creation. He saw them as living stones, with much to contribute – even, it must be said, Judas.

As the pastor and writer and Church planter Nadia Bolz-Weber says,

*Sometimes the fact that there is nothing about you that makes you the right person to do something is exactly what God is looking for.*<sup>3</sup>

Indeed.

So what is stopping you, friends, from “letting [your]selves be built into a spiritual house”? Maybe it’s that you don’t like that passive voice; maybe it’s that you prefer to be the ones “in charge.”

Or maybe (and this is what I think is really going on, in most cases) you don’t think that you are qualified – to participate in liturgy, to help with Children’s

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<sup>3</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016).

Chapel, to visit (or write notes) to those who are “shut in” at home, to sing in the Choir, to attend Bible Study, to join the Green Team, or to start a new ministry altogether. Maybe because *you* can’t see your place in the bigger picture, in the larger structure, you don’t believe you have one.

*Buzzer sound.*

Thank you for playing, anyway!

We are all living stones, Dear Ones – big, small, middlins, funny-shaped ones – and God has a place for each one of us.

We may not see where we fit, but the Stonemason, the Master Builder, does. Our job is to let ourselves be built into something that is strong and will last.

May it be so.

*Amen.*