

Fifth Sunday of Easter - May 10, 2020 - Saint David's, Halifax NS

Readings: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 19, 23-24; I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Call to Worship: *[adapted from Psalm 31]*

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

God is a rock of refuge for us, a strong fortress to save us.

God is indeed our rock and fortress. God leads and guides us.

Prayer:

Faithful God, how abundant is your goodness!

We bless you for showing us steadfast love.

**We rejoice that the grave could not hold your Son,
and that he has conquered death,**

and risen to rule over all powers of this earth.

**We praise you that he summons us into new life,
to follow him with joy and gladness.**

**We delight in the presence of your Spirit
who lifts us from doubt and despair.**

Praise, glory and thanksgiving to you, our God, forever. Amen.

Psalm 31:1-5, 19, 23-24

¹ In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

² Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³ You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

⁴ take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

¹⁹ O how abundant is your goodness
that you have laid up for those who fear you,
and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone!

²³ Love the LORD, all you his saints.

The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.

²⁴ Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD.

I Peter 2:2-10

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”
⁸ and

“A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Reflection:

Most of the church buildings I have been associated with through my life have been made of wood or brick. But three of them were made of stone: the one in which I was baptized, the one to which I was appointed as a newly ordained minister, and one in between where my father served as an assistant minister for a year when I was eight years old. This was St. James (Pollock) Parish Church in Glasgow, Scotland. In 1962, it was a thriving congregation with about 2000 members and serving the wider parish of about 20,000 population in a post-war housing development. Among my memories of that church was the story that it had been relocated from its original place in order to serve better the community. But it wasn't just the congregation that had moved to a new building. It was the building itself that had been moved stone by stone and rebuilt on the new land. The logistics of that enterprise boggle the mind. But there it was—dismantled, reconstructed, solid on its foundation, ready to serve in Christ's name, a church made of “living stones” that could move to new territory and new ministry.

The author of First Peter describes the church of Christ as being constructed of “living stones” built by God on the foundation of the risen Jesus, the key “living stone,” the cornerstone chosen and precious in God's sight. This is not some architectural wonder, not some mausoleum of nostalgia but a living spiritual household raised upon the life-giving presence of Christ, the community of faith grounded in praise and service of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.

It is likely that the original audience of the First Letter of Peter consisted of persons on the margins of society in Asia Minor—Gentiles, resident aliens and household slaves. Displaced and dispossessed--socially, economically, politically, as well as spiritually--these new followers of Jesus suffered in a state of dis-equilibrium. But the author reminds them of good news, that in Christ God creates a new place for those who have none. They are united

as believers in one body, one household, one race that transcends racial and ethnic divides, one priesthood and nation, God's own people. God builds this spiritual house, God lays the cornerstone, God creates a people to proclaim God's "mighty acts who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light." They are not a social club, existing only for themselves, but a household of disciples commissioned to tell the story in word and deed of God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. They have a new identity, a new vocation: to be a house of living stones, formed and ordered by the Spirit.

The phrase "living stones" conjures up for me a kind of Harry Potter scenario, a Hogwarts School for Wizards sort of building where stairs move and walls change and portraits move. Rather than the usual understanding of stone as hard, immovable, inflexible, and solid, "living stones" suggest something fluid and adaptable, yet of enduring quality.

We are surely in a state of dis-equilibrium in these days, both as citizens of a pandemic-stricken world and as disciples of Jesus in changing times. But might we find hope and new energy in the idea that as the church we are "living stones"? Through our New Beginnings journey, we have been guided by the Spirit into imagining church differently. It may be that, as living stones, we are to be like the stones of St. James Pollock Parish Church in Glasgow—taken down, as it were, from one place and reassembled and rebuilt in another, a church made of "living stones" that can move to new territory and new ministry. Not literally leaving our current physical location—you have made that decision to stay--but being transformed into a new way of being the church through new relationships, new ways of being in the community, new ventures in mission and service.

Sometimes, naturally enough, we run out of steam and find ourselves anxious or sad or weary. Our vision dims and our courage falters. It is then we need to hear Jesus' words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

Trust in God. Trust in the Risen Jesus.

"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, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

May we discover and rediscover who we are and the joy of being God's household, God's own people, living stones fluid and adaptable yet of enduring quality who know and live and share God's grace, hope and abundant life revealed in our Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel.

Prayer:

Loving God, we delight in being your household,
living stones built by you into a spiritual house,
your own people in order that we may proclaim your mighty acts
in calling us out of darkness into your marvellous light.

Thank you for Jesus Christ by whose incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection,
we come to know you and your love.

Thank you for the guidance and strength we receive in union with him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Compassionate God, be with those who are suffering. Sustain those in our world and community who have lost much through COVID-19, through murderous attacks, accident or natural calamity. Comfort those who are grieving, strengthen those who seek to bring help, encourage those who can be generous. We pray also for those who are ill or in trouble of any kind, that you will bless each one in need.

God of new life, on this Mother's Day, we give thanks for those who have brought us to birth, who have nurtured with love and guidance. We pray for all mothers, that you will bless them with courage, patience, and wisdom. We pray, too, for all who have lost their mothers, especially children and youth orphaned way too soon. Surround them with comfort, love and a knowledge of your abiding and compassionate presence.

Eternal God, your love is stronger than death and in the raising of Jesus Christ from the tomb you begin a new heavens and a new earth. In hope, we rejoice in the lives of those whom you have drawn to your eternal embrace. Keep us in joyful communion with them until we join the saints of every people and nation, gathered before your throne in ceaseless praise. As we work for and await your new creation, help us to trust your promise that all things work together for good for those who love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.
Amen.*