

Easter 4—Year B
Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
I John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Cornerstones and builders, sheep and shepherds, wolves and hired hands—there’s a lot going on in these lessons for today.

We begin with Acts 4 where **Peter and John have just healed a man and gotten in hot water with the powers-that-be for it.** *They* want to know, “**By what power or by what name did you do this?**” Peter cuts to the chase, “**Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’**”

First of all, *why is it that healing irritates people* so? Truly, why do we find ways to *challenge* or *minimize* or *discount healing*, especially if we *perceive* it was *not done in the right way* or *through the proper channels*? Peter captures the *fullness of Jesus*, referring to Jesus’ *divine vocation* as “**Christ**” and locating *that vocation* firmly in Jesus’ *humanity*, as in “**the guy from Nazareth.**” Jesus is the *crucified and risen one*; the *one rejected by the religious leaders and elite*; and *yet*, the one who has *become the cornerstone*.

I love this image of that which is **rejected**, that which is **deemed as unworthy**, that which is **lifted high upon the cross**—that supreme **icon of humiliation and shame and desolation and despair**—**ALL of THAT becomes the cornerstone of a new structure.**

Cornerstones may be **more decorative** in the architecture of our time, but in **ancient architecture**, they **mattered**, and they **mattered a lot**. A **strong cornerstone** meant the **whole structure was stronger**, and **conversely**, a **weaker cornerstone** put the **whole structure at risk**.

Brother David Vyrhof, one of the SSJE monks, said this in his Friday reflection: “*The world offers us any number of attractive stones which we can choose as the cornerstone of our lives: our personal gifts and talents, our wealth and our possessions, our physical beauty, or our clever minds. And yet these things can and will pass away. If we build on them, we may soon find ourselves on sinking sand. Christ alone is our sure foundation.*”

He raises a great question for us to ponder, “**What have you chosen as the cornerstone of your life?**” I can think of **all kinds of things** I’ve put in that spot over the years, and indeed, in the end, **they never hold up like I think they will**. Eventually, **circumstance, life**, maybe even your **own choices**, they **reveal the weaknesses in all these other stones, until we stumble on the one stone** that is **beyond all time and circumstance, Jesus—crucified and risen—**who says to us, “**Bring it all here, all the good, the bad, and the ugly; all your weaknesses and failures and losses; all that the world has deemed unworthy, less than, all that the world, and maybe even yourself, has rejected, bring that here, and know as I join and integrate it into myself it becomes part of the cornerstone, the very point that holds a sure foundation together upon which new life can be built.**”

Then the lessons move us along to **beloved Psalm 23** with all of its talk of **green pastures and still waters**. *After this past year*, those **sound glorious!** The **Lord who is my shepherd who can revive my soul** and

lead me along right pathways—in *this year of ambiguous and confusing choices*, again, this is **balm to our weary souls**. *In a year full of the valley of the shadow of death* in more ways than we can count, *in a year* where we have *watched humanity be pummeled* by evil, the sense that **we need not fear any of this because the Lord is with us giving us tools to comfort us as we make our way is astoundingly good news**. And to *acknowledge* that those who trouble us will indeed still trouble us, *and yet, in the midst of that trouble*, God is going to spread a table before us anyway and anoint our heads with oil, just like prophets and royalty, **anoint us with dignity and purpose, and fill our cups full to overflowing is better news still**. We get to trust that goodness and mercy will have our backs; they will be our rearguard, all the days of our lives, and we will find our resting place, our dwelling place, our home with God forever. And if we *swing back to the first passage*, we **know** just how strong and secure and beautiful a house this is with Jesus holding it altogether at the corner. We can rest here.

But we don't get to rest for long because I John 3 reminds us that just as Jesus laid down his life for us, we need to lay down our lives for one another. *How do we bind ourselves to the cornerstone and keep taking that which the world would reject and keep building out from the corner to create a foundation for a new world where all find the shelter and rest they need?* I John knows the temptation of the false cornerstones that Br. David named, and he calls us to the building-up work of love. He minces no words when he asks, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” John continues, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Words are good, words are important, and words are easy to utter. Truth is harder; action is harder still, but love isn't a static, stationary, abstract concept; love is full of movement and power; it is dynamic in its never-ending capacity to link and connect and bind together. “We are to love one another, just as Jesus commanded us to do,” says John. This is the web of life and relationship that Jesus calls us to, and it's always got its eye on those in need, those at the margin, those who are most vulnerable, seeking always to weave *these* people into life that they too may finally rest secure in the house of the Lord where mercy and kindness reign and green pastures and still waters abound.

And just as we start to let our shoulders relax and our hearts open, just a bit, we come to John 10. It would be easy to slip back into our reptilian brains as we remember that the wolves still roam and the sheep are still so vulnerable. With the hired hand disappearing on us, it is understandable that the realist in us *might feel* it's all up to us and swing into our own fight, flight, freeze, appease response, *but that would miss the point*. We aren't the good shepherd; we're the sheep. Just as we're *not* meant to be the cornerstone, but we're meant to *join ourselves* to the corner, *so now*, we're *not* meant to be the good shepherd but to *follow him* and *take our cues from him*. He is steadfast; he doesn't have to flee because he is free. *When you know that you have the power to lay down your life AND the power to take it up again THEN you are free. No one can take your life from you if you know how to lay it down. If you're not afraid of losing your life, then you are truly free to live it*. We're definitely back in the land of paradox; they sound contradictory but the heart and soul hear these things and intuit that they are true. *They know the voice of the shepherd who knows them intimately*. They know the power of the flock in whom all are welcome and that just keeps growing as the good shepherd keeps adding more and more sheep to the ranks.

There are so many wolves out there in the world, but we need not fear *any* of them. Ultimately, the good shepherd has got us; again, we can rest secure. And from that place of ultimate security, *we are free to take tremendous risks as we navigate a world full of wolves and hired hands and so many lost sheep*. And lest we *overidentify* with *only the sheep*, if we're honest, within our own soul, we'll also find a wolf and hired hand who show themselves from time to time. *Whether internal voices OR potent external forces*, though the wolf might tear at our flesh, kill us even, and the hired hand may abandon

us altogether, the wolf can't steal a life, nor the hired hand forsake one that knows the power of dying and rising in the name of the Crucified and Risen Lord.

The scriptures are so vital because they are so real. They don't sugarcoat the world, *ever*, but they give us a **bigger story**, a **bigger frame from which to view our little slice of life**, and the **bigger frame** gives us **grounds for hope**. They remind us that, whether it's a **building with a cornerstone** or **building a flock with a good shepherd**, *we are always woven into something so much bigger than ourselves with the Source of Life anchoring us at every turn.*

In a world where it feels like the foundations are shaking, and so many are cracking, it helps to know that the **ONE** we have staked our lives upon still stands. *Bonded to him*, let us lay the foundation of love and mercy and kindness, stone by stone, *until everyone finds themselves within the house of the Lord—a place* where they can **finally breathe and rest**, *a place* where the **table is spread** and **all are anointed** and the **cup can't help but overflow**, *a place* where the **green pastures are plentiful** and the **still waters revive the soul**, *a place* where one is **known, intimately known**, *a place* of total freedom whose cost is surrender.

The wolf will never understand such a world, nor the hired hand, nor the enemies who continue to trouble us, nor the powers-that-be so threatened by the love that heals, *but let us hold out a space for their transformation too*. This good shepherd won't rest *until* the wolf and lamb lie down together and *neither* has to live in fear anymore, because that's the *only* kind of house worth living in forever. Amen.

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April 25, 2021