



## “What Large Stones”

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*Mark 13:1-8*

Did any of you grow up thinking that if the rapture were to happen that you would be whisked off into heaven, leaving everything behind, even your clothes and shoes? I mean, we’ve all heard those stories, right? We’ve all read books or watched the cheesy 1970s movies or listened to television preachers who waxed on and on about the end of the world. I remember when my church history professor and the Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, Dr. Bill Leonard, remarked that if the rapture were indeed true, and if it happened in our lifetime, that he would probably grab on to the nearest tree so that he wouldn’t be whisked off into heaven. He thought that the idea of running away from those left on earth was counter to the mission of Jesus. He felt that the real work of love and reconciliation would be with those who remained and not with those who were already walking the golden streets and entering the pearly gates. Leonard felt it was selfish to enjoy the glitz and glamour of heaven while there was still work to be done to show love on the dusty roads of the world.

“What beautiful pearly gates and what shiny golden streets!” Because that’s what the disciples sounded like in today’s Gospel reading, right? Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem, in the Holy City, the grand and marvelous residence of God Almighty. And they were in Jerusalem for the festival season of Passover. Today’s scripture took place after Jesus entered the city as king, riding a colt with people shouting “Hosanna!” This was after what we heard last week from Tim when he preached about Jesus sitting across from the Temple coffers, watching a poor widow give her last two coins. This was after the disciples watched those rich temple elites take everything from the poor and marginalized. And, in light of these hurtful actions by the religious systems of oppression of the day, the disciple’s reaction of awe and admiration and amazement seemed really out of place, since such grandeur and opulence was built on the gifts of lowly widows and other oppressed peoples.

But the disciples were in Jerusalem at festival time and we see they were easily amazed by the splendor and the grandeur of the Temple. “What large stones! What grand and awesome buildings!” Jesus’ disciples were not big city folks. They were fishermen and they were from small towns. And so, now in Jerusalem, they did what all of us do if we were to visit Paris, or New York City, or Tokyo, or Beijing. They oohed and ahed. They were astounded by the big buildings, by the Temple masonry work, by the sense of history that permeated the place. I’m sure if they had had cameras or iPhones, they would’ve taken selfies in front of the large Temple walls then uploaded them to Instagram or Facebook. Because this was it! This was the dwelling place of God!

This was also the moment they had been waiting for. They probably thought if they followed Jesus, the king that entered Jerusalem just moments before, that they might be part of this new powerful political religion. That they would be those special disciples sitting at the right and the

left of the new ruler, and live in the big buildings with the large stones, and reside in the powerful places of the world. This was it! This was their moment! The disciples had steeple envy. You know what steeple envy is right? It's when you are part of church that isn't as big as another church, or as rich as another church, or has as many people as another church. Steeple envy is looking at the church down the street and saying, "What large stones! What grand and awesome buildings!"

And that's how the disciples were. They loved the big. They loved the better. They loved the bold. And the disciples were just like us. Professor Karoline Lewis says, "Regardless of time, regardless of proximity to Jesus, regardless of so-called illumination, disciples across the age are attracted to splendor and grandeur. We are drawn to the biggest and the best. The most influential. The most powerful. The most anything. We love superlatives. Lest we think we are any more knowledgeable than Jesus' first disciples, we are not. We only know different attractions, manifestations, and incarnations of magnificence, especially when it comes to what it means to be a Christian."

We, like the disciples, have large stones in our lives too, don't we? We want a bigger house, a better car, a glamorous wardrobe, a grander sanctuary, a larger budget. I, too, want those larger stones. I want us to have more transformational worship, or more dynamic preaching, or more generous stewardship campaigns. We have many stones in our lives that we want to build upon, to draw the onlookers, to impress others, or to gain more potential members. So, I'm like the disciples. I'm like the disciples because I want the large stones and the grand buildings and all that those things represent. I'm like the disciples where they thought that bigger and better marked the truly blessed of God. I'm like the disciples who saw a king be paraded into the city with shouts of praise and the waving of palm leaves. I'm like the disciples who wanted to sit at the right hand and the left hand of the one who would be the new ruler of the peoples. I'm like the disciples, "What large stones!"

But what did Jesus say to the disciples immediately after they gawked and drooled over the magnificent temple? He told them that it would soon be torn down and not a single stone would be left standing. That structure, that building, that institution that they had put their trust in would no longer be around. God's home would be destroyed. And Jesus' strange prediction of the destruction of the Temple was deeply challenging for the disciples. The Temple was central to their Jewish faith. The great stones and wondrous architecture of the Temple reflected God's power and glory. And I don't blame them for standing, mouths agape, excited by the large stones. But while the disciples focused on the building, the Temple, the large stones, Jesus proclaimed another message, a message that would reduce the essence of their faith to ruins. Jesus preached a message that took the love of God out of the structures and systems of the day and instead moved it into the streets, into the places where people needed hope and healing and inclusion and reconciliation.

And that's the reason Jesus was crucified. He blasphemed, spoke badly of, the powerful political religion of the day. He claimed that God would not need the trappings of a gold-gilded and marble-made temple. No, God would be out where Jesus planted his feet. God would be out in Galilee, in Bethany, in Caesarea Philippi, and across the sea in the land of outsiders and outcasts. God would no longer be in the trappings of grand buildings and large stones but would now be in

Christ the solid rock, where we stand, where we find our footing, where everything else is sinking sand. God had now come in the flesh and the disciples needed to find God somewhere else, in Jesus, in Gentiles, in Jews, in Pagans, in all the peoples of the world. What large stones! No! What an awesome God that is in all things!

Frederick Buechner wrote these words and I think it shows us that God is no longer in the large stones of institution and power and prestige. God's love is in all and for all. Buechner says, "The love for equals is a human thing – of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing – the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing – to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy – love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world."

And the early Christians who were reading the Gospel of Mark needed to know that God's love was all around them, that they could follow Jesus in a world without a Temple, without the places of power, and the large stones of safety. If you remember as we've discussed this Gospel in detail on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, Mark wrote his Gospel in a world that was crumbling. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Early leaders like Paul and Peter were probably dead and gone. The first Christians were being persecuted and killed by Romans marching across the land. The future looked bleak. Everything seemed lost. These first followers of Jesus were wondering if there was to be a word of hope for them. And so, in the midst of the disciples drooling over the vast religious structures of the day, Jesus said that this was just the "beginning of the birth pangs." There were wars and rumors of wars, along with the persecution these first Christians were facing. There were signs that something was about to happen, that the labor pains would someday be over and that new birth would indeed happen.

But I wonder if new life and the birth of a new reign of God can only happen when we leave the confines of our beautiful buildings and our safe structures and our powerful places. Maybe the birth of God's new world happens when we follow the one born in a stable and breathed his last on the cross rather than preaching power from a mighty temple.

There's a story I heard from the head rabbi of Temple Emanu-El that is part of the Jewish Midrash. The story speaks of the perceived importance of a holy temple, rather than the holiness we must cherish in other people. In the story, a rabbi, Rabbi Yossi, felt that it was important to enter the solitude of the ruins of a temple to pray rather than pray among the people on the busy road.

Rabbi Yossi said, "Once when I was on the road, I entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. The prophet Elijah came and waited for me at the door until I had finished my prayer. When I had finished my prayer he said to me, 'Peace be with you, Rabbi', and I answered, 'Peace be upon you, my master and teacher' Then he said, 'my son, why have you come into this ruin?' I replied, 'I came in to pray.' He said 'You should have prayed on the road.' I answered, 'I was

afraid that I might be disturbed by people passing by.’ He said, ‘You should have a prayed a shorter version of your prayer.’

From this Rabbi Yossi said that he learned three things. First, that Jewish law said that people shouldn’t go into a ruin because of safety and the fear of falling debris. Secondly, that it is indeed permitted to pray on the road, in fact, even encouraged. And thirdly, that those who do pray on the road may pray a shortened prayer, because prayer is only a part of what needs to happen on the road. On the road, we are to journey with the people and be with them, pray for them, and love them. We must learn to pray on the road, rather than in the ruins.

I know that life makes us feel like we are reduced to our foundations, that our hopes and dreams have been stripped bare and now lie exposed on the cold stones of destruction. The rubble of our political system, the rubble of our jobs, the rubble of our relationships, the rubble of our health, the rubble and ruins are around us and we don’t know how we can move on, how we can hear God’s voice, how we can pray. But just like the Jewish story I just told, God calls us out of the ruins in order to go pray on the road. We are beckoned, as Jesus’ disciples and followers were, to take our eyes off of the large stones which will not last and will be torn down, and to put our eyes on Jesus who walked that very same road to Golgotha and to the cross. Because salvation wasn’t going to come through the brick and mortar of the Temple but through the incarnate temple that was Jesus’ own body. And the temple of Jesus’ body would have to be torn to pieces, destroyed so that God’s love for all could be revealed. What large stones... but what a larger love.

Whatever happens with the rapture, or with the stones, or with the ruins of our lives, Jesus loves us and God is out there on the road. And it is up to us to find God in the streets, in all creation, in all people who God created, and also within us. These large stones don’t hold God anymore. It’s time we go out and join the work of Jesus on the road to the cross. What large stones! No, what a wonderful savior.

Amen.