

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Psalm 118:22.

Jesus was the stone that the builders rejected. Jesus became the cornerstone of what God built and is still building today. Jesus reminds us elsewhere that the disciple is not above the master. So, if Jesus was a stone the builders rejected, his followers most certainly are.

Before we dig deeper, let’s review some basics. What is it that God is building? God is building a kingdom where he rules and we are ruled by him because we’ve been reconciled to him by Jesus and because we’ve chosen to be in a loving relationship with him. That relationship and that kingdom are what God is building.

Why is Jesus the cornerstone of this? Because Jesus is Plan A. He was the author of creation at the beginning and he will come again at the end. Alpha and Omega. And he’s more. So much more. He lived with us, taught us, died for us, and rose so that we may never die. And not just us, but all of creation. Jesus is the cornerstone of the entire plan of our salvation, redemption, and relationship with God. Who Jesus is and that he would be rejected in his time is mentioned in scripture all over the place.

Which brings us to those builders doing the rejecting of metaphoric stones. In Lent we saw Jesus rejected by the high priest in Jerusalem and all of the high priest’s cronies. The same cast of characters is rejecting Peter and the apostles in our reading today from Acts.

The religious authorities are furious because the apostles have “filled Jerusalem” with the gospel message. The religious authorities are furious because they don’t want it known that they were the cause of Jesus being killed. They’ve got a religion to run in a country that’s occupied by heathen Romans. Religious authority is the only authority they have, and they hold the identity of Israel in their hands.

They were probably furious with the apostles running around preaching and teaching a different spiritual knowledge of God with an authority the high priest had not given. So far as the high priest and the religious leaders are concerned, the apostles had no right at all to go around damaging something that’s the responsibility of the religious leaders.

These same religious leaders had just thrown Peter and the apostles into jail, but an angel sprung them free. Now Peter and the apostles are again in front of the very people who were instrumental in Jesus’ death. The very people that Peter had been so afraid of that Peter rejected Jesus three times. The very people the disciples ran away from when Jesus was taken from them. They might even be in the same room that Jesus had been in before he was crucified. But Peter and the other disciples stood before the religious authorities before being sent to jail, and now they’re standing before them a second time. Standing and not running away.

They’ve changed. In our reading from Acts, they don’t even sound afraid. In fact, Peter and the apostles insult the religious leaders solidly, not once but three times. First, Peter and the gang call them murderers. In Acts chapter 5 verse 30: “...Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.” The apostles aren’t letting them use the excuse that the Romans were the real killers. This is an unqualified accusation of murder.

Then the apostles say that the person they murdered is able to forgive sins. Jesus got into a lot of trouble by saying this about himself, because everyone knows only God can forgive sins. So what the apostles are saying here is that the religious authorities murdered someone VERY special to God. Someone we know as the Son of God, who sits at the right hand of God. The apostles are saying the person the religious leaders killed wasn’t just some guy. The accusation, the insult, is that the religious leaders murdered the very person they are supposed to be serving.

And finally, Peter and the apostles accuse the religious authorities of not obeying God at all. They say that they were witnesses to the risen Christ and so was the Holy Spirit. The implication here is that the spiritual leaders can go ask the Holy Spirit if they don't believe the apostles. Because, and here's the insult, "God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey him."

You probably could have heard a pin drop just before the priests started demanding these men be killed. And they very nearly were killed, but got a flogging instead, which didn't stop them at all.

These apostles, a lot of them were rural folks and fishermen, and probably all of them spoke with a funny accent. Even if they had had some higher education, which most of them probably didn't, no one would have taken them seriously among the religious and cultural movers and shakers in the big city of Jerusalem.

But the apostles had set Jerusalem on fire with their witness. People listened to them. Thousands became convinced and became believers because of the witness of the apostles. These stones that were rejected became, like their master, the foundation of the Christian Church, even though even talking about it could cost them their lives. These rejected stones, Peter who is the rock upon which the Church is built, they could face anything and turn thousands of hearts to the good news of Christ because of what they witnessed between Easter and Ascension.

It was there in the house where they were hiding on that first Easter evening, doors locked tightly, that Jesus first "stood among them." Jesus didn't just appear like a ghost. He was physically present. He encouraged them to touch his body. Jesus ate with them and continued to teach them. For forty days Jesus continued to visit them and teach them until it was time for him to return to the Father.

Imagine what it would have been like to have watched Jesus die and be buried and then to have him with you in the flesh, his wounds still apparent but no longer harming him. Our gospel reading today says the disciples rejoiced when they saw Jesus. In our gospel reading today we see first reactions. And these are important, but let's also think of what life might have been like for the disciples afterwards. During those forty days between Easter and Ascension. So many emotions. So many implications. So many questions. Such a changed reality.

During the forty days after Easter, the disciples were blessed with a period of time in close proximity with the master, Jesus Christ. A kind of spiritual maternity leave, if you will. There was so much to absorb through nearness of the risen Christ. All those lessons Jesus tried to get through their thick skulls before he died take on new meaning in the presence of the risen Christ.

This takes time. The meaning of the gospel takes time. Time with Jesus. We also need to be with the risen Christ, our brother and master and messiah and beloved. During this Easter season, let's take a little time to be with Jesus. Soak in his presence. Breathe him in. Listen to what he has to say with new, Easter ears and Easter minds and Easter hearts. Gather around the table together and be fed by him. The Easter season is like an extended Sabbath where we can rest and be filled by Jesus, where we can rejoice and be glad. If we do, if we take this time with our risen Lord, we too will be able to stand before that which once frightened us, without fear. If we do, we too will be able to pour forth the gospel in the face of rejection, and rejoice.

Let us rejoice and be glad, my fellow rejected stones. Our master, the rejected cornerstone, is alive and well, and with us right now. Alleluia. Amen.