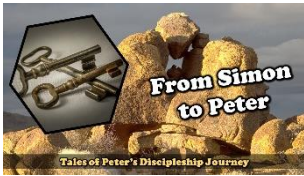


## From Simon to Peter



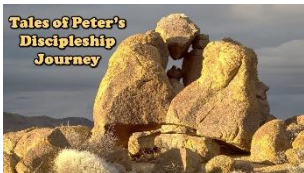
<Luke 24:50-53>

<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

<Matthew 16:13-23>

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, **you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church**, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will **give you the keys of the kingdom** of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "**Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**"



This is the fifth sermon in this series about the disciple Peter. We started with the story of Jesus calling Peter to be a disciple and how he immediately left his fishing job. Then, we had the story of Peter impetuously walking on the water and having to be rescued. That was followed by hearing how Peter denied knowing Jesus on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. And then last week, how Jesus made a resurrection appearance forgiving and restoring Peter. **Today, we are reflecting on how Peter got his new name and what that might mean for all of us.** Find previous sermons here: [Methodist IC.org.uk](http://Methodist IC.org.uk) or click on the series link just below this video.

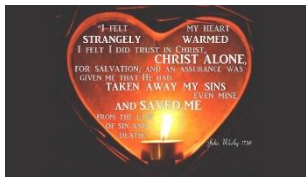
Our scripture from the gospel of Matthew began with Jesus asking the disciples 'Who do people say that I am?' They gave him various answers that they had heard. And then he asked 'Who do **you** say that I am?' Once again, it is our impetuous Peter that boldly reacts first, this time with a **heart-stirring moment of clarity**: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

**Have you ever been trying to come to a greater clarity about your faith and suddenly had an 'ah-ha' moment?** A time when someone asked you a probing faith question and suddenly something clicked and you realized that in here (heart) you really did know the answer? Or maybe it was an event that happened and you have not looked at things in quite the same way again.



This week I attended the *Festival of Homiletics*. That's a conference about preaching, and with COVID-19 it could not be held in-person, so, for the first time ever, it was offered online and free! One of the speakers was Anna Carter Florence. She pointed out that a lot of scripture at the moment is sounding different to us because we are in the middle of this pandemic; life feels different and so we are finding things in the scriptures that jolt us and shock us as we identify with passages in a different way. This dislocation that we are experiencing in our lives due to the pandemic

is real and unlike anything we have ever experienced; and yet, there is much in the Bible that speaks to terrifying moments. And then she preached on the Ezekiel passage of the vision of the dry bones. **Ah ha!** I won't be able to look at that passage that she preached upon in the same way ever again.



John Wesley also had an ah-ha moment of clarity on the 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1738, that's 282 years ago, today, He was a Church of England clergy person. He had been to America to spread the gospel message and yet he was feeling like there was something missing from his faith. On the boat sailing to America, they had encountered a bad storm, and he was afraid, and yet he had seen how calm the Moravian Christians were and how their faith brought them reassurance and comfort. Now, as he attended a meeting in a Chapel on Aldersgate Street in London. John Wesley felt that his heart was strangely warmed. As he heard Luther's preface of the Epistle to the Romans, something stirred within him, and he heard the words in a new way, and he received assurance of his salvation.

*[Back to Peter!]* Immediately after Peter answers Jesus' question expressing the answer that Jesus had hoped that one of them would give him, Jesus give Peter a new identity. When Peter first became a disciple, his name was Simon. Simon, son of Jonah. Now Jesus says to him, I am going to call you Peter which means the rock. And I am going to build my church on you. *That is quite the commissioning and undertaking!*

In the gospel of John, in John 1:42, when John describes the calling of the very first disciples, he says, *[Andrew] brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter)*. So in John's gospel, Simon already knows that he will be called the Rock. But now, in Matthew's gospel, we have the affirmation of that name change and the addition that he is being given that name **because the church will be built on him, on Peter, the rock.**



*Just digress a bit for a minute.* One of the things that I enjoy doing is finding artwork to go with the sermons and series that I preach. It took me a while to find a picture that I thought would work for this series. The Greek word *Petra* that Jesus uses for rock, is not a rock like a detached stone or boulder; it means a mass of connected rock, and is used to describe a rock ledge, a cliff or a massive rock.<sup>1</sup> As you know, this was the picture that I chose for our series. It is a picture from a site called Pixabay<sup>2</sup> that features work that can be widely used without breach of copyright. This one did not have an artists name, just the artist number 272447. I do not know where in the world this rock formation is. **What do you see as you look at it?** I see a rock figure at the top of a cliff in a prayer posture. **Can you see the body, head and praying hands?**

**What are you thinking?** I thought of the church as a place of prayer. I thought of the Biblical stories of mountains. I thought of Peter down on his knees weeping when he betrayed Jesus. I thought of Peter who in all his keenness fell asleep when Jesus prayed. I thought of rocks that made up the Temple in Jerusalem and the rocks used to build our churches today. And I thought, if only the stones could talk. **How does this picture move you?**

After telling Peter that the church will be built on him, Jesus also says that "the gates of Hades will not prevail" against the church. What a promise! What encouragement! There is no power in the world, not even humanity's greatest enemy, death itself, will be able to thwart or overcome the work of the church. **Hold onto that promise as we ride out his pandemic!**



And to go with all of that, Jesus also promises to give Peter the keys of the Kingdom, with the authority to decide what will be bound or loosed, **meaning that Peter will have doctrinal and disciplinary authority.** Throughout the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as "binding and loosing" the teachings of the

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple* and <https://biblehub.com/greek/4073.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://pixabay.com/photos/rock-formation-geologic-stones-1574679/>.

Torah. That is, Jesus declares certain actions to be necessary and others not to be required. And sometimes he tightens the rules, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:43-44).*” And now, Jesus is saying that Peter, and ultimately future church leaders, will have that interpretive power.



I wonder exactly how Jesus felt in that moment about giving those keys to Peter? Was it a bit like giving a 17-year old the keys to your car as they learn to drive? Did he have any second thoughts? I know when our boys were little, I wanted to freeze time and not have them driving, and yet, I knew that it was an important next step, and that they would learn by doing. And I wonder if Peter felt like many 17-year-olds, excited and raring to go, but full of trepidation and praying that they would not crash the car!

In the last few verses that we heard today, not long after this conversation about the keys, Jesus began to talk with the disciples about the manner of his death, *Peter said “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* <sup>23</sup> *But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”* Poor Peter. He has moments of such insight and other moments of foot in mouth. And yet, he was the one given the task to build the church and be the keeper of the keys.

This declaration of Peter to be the rock on which the church will be founded comes in Jesus’ ministry while they are still in Galilee. It is not immediately before Jesus’ death. There is some time still to go. Jesus calls Peter to this task and equips him for it before he will be called to actually carry it out.



In the scripture we heard last week, Jesus made a resurrection appearance and three times asks Peter to feed and take care of his sheep. This was another affirmation of his call to Peter to be the shepherd of the flock.

And now the time has come. Forty days after Jesus’ resurrection and after multiple resurrection appearances, Jesus ascends to heaven. This transition is finally upon the disciples as they move from life with Jesus to life after Jesus.

***What is Peter going to do now?***

We’ve got another skit for you this morning. It is imaginary conversation between Peter and Jesus called *A New Experience*. It comes from John Bell & Graham Maule’s book *Off the Record Conversations: Jesus & Peter*. [In the Skit, Peter asks Jesus to explain more about the church that he is supposed to build. Who is it for? When Jesus indicates that it is for everybody, Peter is incredulous that it includes women.]

This pandemic that we are in the middle of, is for us a transition moment. Life before COVID-19 and life after COVID-19. *What is it going to be like afterwards?* Scripture is not static; it must be reapplied to new situations. Just as Jesus applies the teachings of the Torah in fresh and creative ways, the church must be emboldened to interpret the teachings of Jesus in new and inspired ways, attempting both to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus and to be open to the voice of Jesus that speaks through the church to new situations and problems.

Each of us when we read scripture prioritize some stories over others, some verses over others. And sometimes those interpretations end up doing harm to others. I saw a cartoon this week that said: *I can do all things through a verse taken out of context.* **What are we going to carry into the future and what are we going to prioritize or reinterpret?** In our skit, Peter was wrestling with the place of women in the church! In the Methodist Church, perhaps we have moved beyond that, although society still struggles with equality of the sexes. **What have we learned through this time of staying at home?** I hope that we will have realized how interconnected we all are. Our flourishing as individuals depends on the ability of others to flourish. The health of one affects the health of the whole community.

We have seen the effects in this country and around the world both in the pandemic and long before that time that poverty and racism have had on the outcomes in different communities; the effect of money and greed and a lack of generosity of spirit that is pushing more and more folk into poverty and homelessness; the effects on the climate and the environment of our endless consumption of the earth's resources.

We have this amazing opportunity now to lay a new foundation on top of the rubble. To build a new church that advocates for justice for all whom we have oppressed. That opposes racism, sexism, heterosexism (homophobia), ageism, ableism, classism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression and prejudice that have damaged us all as a beloved community. A church that speaks up on ethical issues and models that in its hospitality to the last and the least.

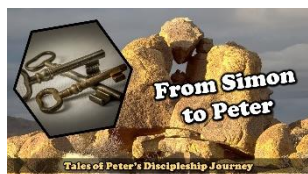
I want to remind you of this beautiful quote that I used a few weeks ago in a sermon. It is a quote by Sonya Renee Taylor. She says: *We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequality, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.*

What are we going to bind and loose? **What are we going to carry into the future and what are we going to reinterpret?** This is a scary time, but it is also an exciting time for the church.

Jesus called Peter, the rock, and entrusted him with the keys. That ah-ha moment of clarity as he declared that Jesus was *the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that moment* ultimately led - after the Ascension & Pentecost - to Peter leading the formation of the Christian church.

John Wesley's heart being strangely warmed was a pivotal event in his life. It ultimately led to the development of the Methodist movement in both Britain and America. As Methodists, we remember this day as Aldersgate Day.

I do not know exactly what will unfold post COVID-19 and I feel like a 17-year old with the car keys unsure that I (and you!) should be trusted to lead in this time. Like Peter, I wish Jesus had been more explicit. I know that we will need to let go, to let loose, some things, and to take up, to bind, some others. **But I reach out in hope right now**, setting my eyes on the Kingdom, a Kingdom where all are welcome and valued where the world's resources are shared so all have enough to thrive and where we are good caretakers of the whole earth.



Simon became Peter, the rock, and ultimately lived up to his name. We too are called to respond to Jesus' call on our lives in a way that is good news for the whole world. In this transitional time before and after COVID-19 may we listen and wait for the ah-ha moments of the Holy Spirit touching and warming our hearts. May we declare with Peter the good news that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. And with trepidation, let us receive those keys and build Christ's Church on the rock that has been laid by Peter and those who have come since, binding and loosing that which we need to, for the glory of God.

For the faithful witness of Peter.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

#### Resources

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Jarvis, Cynthia A. and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Eds. *Feasting on the Gospels*. John, Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.