



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 5 (A)

[RCL] Acts 7:55-70; John 14:1-14

#### About Those Stones

Books can and have been written about some of the bizarre things that have been said by well-meaning friends, family members, and even clergy at funerals.

In The Episcopal Church, what we say follows a four-part formula: we gather to remember our beloved, we give thanks to God for their life, we commend them to God's unending grace and mercy, and we commit their body to its temporal resting place, departing with the great Easter acclamation on our lips: "Alleluia. Christ is risen." We decorate and adorn funerals with various and sundry hymns, readings, anthems, and homilies, but the pattern is the same: remember, give thanks, commend, and commit.

One of the more common readings we hear at funerals is that portion of the gospel we just heard: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." If the gathered congregation at a funeral recalls that the deceased lived a long life, had some measure of success and happiness, shared love and kindness with others, then the words of Jesus sound duly consoling: an acknowledgment of present sorrow and a solemn promise of comfort and life in Jesus. "I will come again, and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." It is a beautiful promise, and it is absolutely true. It marks an end even as it opens a beginning.

But when funerals are occasions where sorrow is mixed with a heavy portion of bitterness or trauma; when the cause of death is violent or brutal, or when life is cut short by disease or disability or war or accident, then death comes as the ancient enemy—not the natural end to life, but the thief who breaks in and steals.

In such a setting, these words of Jesus ring quite differently. Yes, Jesus acknowledges the terrible loss; yes, his heart breaks; yes, he weeps; and still, he says, "Believe in God, believe also in me." We might wonder, as the sisters of Lazarus did, "Where were you?"

In these times, Jesus's promise of resurrected life—an eventual end to heartache, grief, and trauma; the assurance that there will come a time when our hearts are not troubled any longer—comes crashing down as fickle comfort in the wake of such loss.

We see evidence of such experience among the disciples in the wake of Jesus's resurrection. Even after they've rationally accepted the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus; even after seeing the scars from the nails and his pierced side; even after watching him eat—thus confirming that he was neither a ghost nor a zombie but a resurrected person—the disciples still had a spiritual problem that it took them time to overcome.

The real issue at the heart of the resurrection runs much, much deeper than mere knowledge of it or acceptance of its presumed science: that cells which had died are now restored to life.

The resurrection overturns the order that we have not only come to accept but also to rely on. Even when we lament death, wringing our hands, we still look at the whole cosmos according to its particular pattern, an orthodoxy of our own making.

The bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus challenges the order of this world, shaking and shattering it. The love of God invades and overthrows what we thought we know, revealing that the world does not have to be the way it is, and that, in the fullness of God's time, through the resurrection of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, it will not be. Violence and war, hate and malice, pain and tears; the stones hurled at Stephen in our passage from Acts and thrown still at martyrs today; even death itself: all of these are being overcome—in real time.

This truth gets at the heart of the challenge inherent to accepting the Christian message. The challenge is ultimately not about the centrality of bodily resurrection, though that has served as a stumbling block for some. The challenge is our pervasive belief that the death-dealing order of this world—soaked into our very DNA—will somehow prove too great a force to be overcome by Jesus' resurrection. It's not our fear that the resurrection isn't true; it's our fear that, even if it is true, it's not enough to heal what ails us.

Then again, if all we had to hold onto were the historical actions of Jesus in the first century, we might understand how that offers cold comfort in the face of very real violence, strife, pain, and warfare in our own day.

But it's not all we have. And that's where we come in.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." The ascension of Jesus to the Father and the giving of the Spirit to the disciples unleash and disperse the power and life of Christ among the baptized in all time and space.

Jesus has ushered in the kingdom of God, and it is up to us to listen and watch for the Spirit to speak and move among us, leading us to receive what God has done in Jesus and continue to build the body of Christ.

You have heard it said that in the midst of life, we are in death; but it is also true that in the midst of death, we find life.

In a time when the Church is wringing its hands and beating its breast about declining attendance and aging membership, we've got to figure out how to stop using stones as weapons and how to start using them to build God's kingdom.

Go back to Acts and read the story of Stephen's martyrdom again. The people hurling those stones weren't strangers or foreigners or a band of terrorists; no, they were upstanding citizens—the kind of people who, had they lived today, said their prayers every day and went to church and paid their pledge and taught Sunday school.

When we stop listening to one another; when we stop listening for the Spirit; when our concern is focused on the preservation of the self, rather than the flourishing of all, our own faith becomes impoverished, and the bread and wine of the Gospel is turned into stone and vinegar.

Jesus has called us to build his kingdom and he has entrusted us with all the tools we need to do it. When we take those stones in our hands, do we use them as building blocks for the work to which we have been called, or do we use them as weapons to defend and isolate ourselves from risk, vulnerability, and honesty?

Because, in the end, one response requires us to lay down our life so that we may participate in God's resurrected life...

...And the other?

It will quite literally kill us.

*Amen.*

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