

FROM REJECTION TO CORNERSTONE

An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Happy Easter! To each and every one of you. New life is possible. Life can begin again. The one who is utterly rejected can become the cornerstone of the building of the future. That's what today, Easter, is all about. Not just for Jesus, but for you and me too.

But let's start with Jesus and the Bible readings for today.ⁱ Luke tells usⁱⁱ that at the break of dawn three women who had known Jesus well came to his tomb on the third day after he'd been executed and buried. The stone had been rolled away and his body wasn't there. Two men then came up to them and said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." They went back and told the male apostles, but their words seemed to the men an idle tale, and they didn't believe the women. Later in Luke's gospel we learn that two of the apostles were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus that same day, when a man joined them in conversation who didn't seem to know the story of Jesus' crucifixion and the hope that he might have been the one to redeem Israel. When they got to the village and were having supper together, suddenly the two apostles' eyes were opened to it being Jesus himself who'd been walking with them that day, even as he then immediately vanished from their sight. That evening the other disciples

reportedly experienced Jesus among them – startling them, feeling like they’d seen a ghost, forcing them to wonder about this appearance even as they were disbelieving that it could really be Jesus.

Whatever it was that Jesus’s disciples experienced, even if you, like me, don’t think it could have been a bodily resurrection – perhaps visions, or powerful dreams, or simply the sense that Jesus was alive again to them spiritually if not physically – (whatever it was) it launched a new religion which became the largest on earth and two thousand years later is still going strong. Jesus became its cornerstone, even though he’d been utterly rejected just days before: arrested by Jerusalem temple authorities after he disrupted temple activities during the week before Passover, driving certain people out of the building. After his arrest, Jesus was blindfolded, and mocked, and cruelly beaten. He was sentenced by the Roman governor to be executed, and hung on a cross to suffer horribly for hours before he finally expired. Meanwhile, the most prominent of his disciples, Peter, three times publicly denied even knowing him, and none of the male disciples were with him at the end as he was crucified, with one exception as cited only by the gospel writer John.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our Old Testament or Hebrew Bible reading from Psalm 118 describes someone who has been punished severely, even at the hands of God, but ultimately will walk through the gates of righteousness. This metaphor for the turnaround is then stated: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” The verse from Psalm 118 is then quoted by Jesus with reference to himself, according

to three of the four New Testament gospels.^{iv} Early church writers like the authors of the Letter to the Ephesians and the First Letter of Peter extend the use of this metaphor to speak of all Christians as “no longer strangers and aliens,” but “members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone,”^v or as “living stones,” once existing without mercy but now “built into a living house” with the once rejected stone of Jesus as the cornerstone.^{vi}

This theme of rejection and re-establishment, of moving from suffering and death to joyfulness and new life, which began with the Jewish experience of moving from slavery in Egypt to exodus to the promised land, as celebrated at Passover this week, followed by the later Jewish experience of being exiled and then returning to the land of Israel, is played out again and again in the history of Christianity too, especially with its saints.

Take Joan of Arc, for example. A French teenager hears what she identifies as divine voices calling her to help her king defeat the British in battle. She courageously leads French troops and succeeds brilliantly, at least at first. But she’s wounded twice and ultimately imprisoned and tried for heresy in Rouen before the Bishop of Beauvais and the Vicar of the Inquisition. The judges keep pressing her about the nature of her visions, which in the end they find to be “false and diabolical.” She’s burned at the stake as a heretic before a jeering crowd. Utterly rejected. But over a generation’s time the popular feeling about her changes significantly, and the Pope

himself constitutes an appellate court 24 years later, which reverses and annuls her sentence.^{vii} A little late.

But not for her restoration and rebirth in the eyes of the world. As Katherine Harrison wrote in the *New York Times* upon her 600th birthday last year, she's had a dramatically enduring power down through the centuries: "France's national archives include tens of thousands of volumes about her. She has been immortalized by Shakespeare, Voltaire, Twain, Shaw, Brecht, Verdi, Tchaikovsky and Rubens." By the twentieth century she had been canonized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church as well as "entered the collective imagination as a living myth." Embraced not only by Christians, she's also been a hero to French nationalists, Mexican revolutionaries, feminists, children everywhere, and even hairdressers – her haircut inspiring the bob that women wore in the flapper era as a symbol of independence from patriarchy.^{viii} From rejection to cornerstone again, after holding up a cross and continuously calling out Jesus' name as she perished in the flames.^{ix}

As another example, a modern Protestant saint, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was also deeply rejected in his life, and now has a national holiday in his honor. Not only was Rev. King attacked physically and verbally throughout his life by white people opposing his call for racial unity, he was also rejected during the last five years of his life by many black people who called him an Uncle Tom and an apologist for white people's domination. One of the most articulate was Malcolm X, who in 1963,

the year of King's "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, exclaimed in a televised interview, "The white man supports Reverend Martin Luther King, subsidizes Reverend Martin Luther King, so that Reverend Martin Luther King can continue to teach the Negroes to be defenseless--that's what you mean by nonviolent... Just as Uncle Tom, back during slavery used to keep the Negroes from resisting the bloodhound or resisting the Ku Klux Klan by teaching them to love their enemies or pray for those who use them spitefully, today Martin Luther King is just a twentieth-century or modern Uncle Tom or religious Uncle Tom, who is doing the same thing today to keep Negroes defenseless in the face of attack... Now the goal of Dr. Martin Luther King is ... to get the Negroes to forgive the people the people who have brutalized them for four hundred years, by lulling them to sleep and making them forget what those whites have done to them, but the masses of black people today don't go for what Martin Luther King is putting down."^x

Later Stokeley Carmichael, the chair of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and other Black Power advocates criticized King for not being willing to use that term. Carmichael claimed that King wasn't political enough and that he wasn't promoting a revolutionary ideology that would truly awaken the black masses. In major mainstream media, it was widely reported that the torch seemed to be passing from King's hands to a new generation of black leaders who were more militant.^{xi} King wrote a book titled *Where Do We Go From Here*, published

in 1967, in response. He explained that “Beneath all the satisfaction of a gratifying slogan, Black Power is a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that...America is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within.”^{xii}

But there was indeed the possibility of salvation from within American society, even following King’s rejection by other blacks and then his assassination at the hands of a white racist. As a black President of the United States wrote in his proclamation of the King national holiday two months ago, “Today, we celebrate a man whose clarion call stirred our Nation to bridge our differences, and whose legacy still drives us to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.”^{xiii} President Obama in his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize speech explains that he himself is “someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work.” Near the end of the speech he quotes King’s own Nobel speech directly and approvingly: “I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man's present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him.”^{xiv} Well, that’s the message of Easter. New life is possible. Life can begin again. The one who is utterly rejected can become the cornerstone for the building of the future.

But what about the rest of us who aren’t saints? What does the Easter message – from rejection to cornerstone – mean to us? Well, first of all, this is a universal

message of the human life cycle. We're constantly experiencing rejection and then often finding that there's a new day dawning after the dark night, a spring blooming after the cold winter, and hope emerging in the midst of despair. We don't have to think of this as post-martyrdom, like Joan of Arc who died at the age of 19 and Martin Luther King at 39. New life is possible for virtually all of us before our physical deaths. I think of famous people like Eleanor Roosevelt who struggled with deep criticism of her activist role as First Lady, only later within her lifetime to become "one of the most esteemed women in the world" and "the object of almost universal respect."^{xv} Or Winston Churchill, who was roundly rejected as Britain's prime minister in 1945, just after he'd led the country through the Second World War. But in 1951 he was re-elected Prime Minister and by the time of his death had become one of the most influential and beloved figures in British history.^{xvi}

Jesus teaches us that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.^{xvii} He tells us not to worry about our own lives, because can any of us by worrying add a single hour to our span of life?^{xviii} What we should worry about is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting prisoners in jail, and caring for the sick.^{xix} All of the lessons of the Old Testament law and prophets can be summed up, Jesus says, in the injunction to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.^{xx} "Blessed are the merciful," he explains, "for they will receive mercy."^{xxi} It's not all a matter of what happens after one's bodily death, but

often in this life one can move from rejection to acceptance, from hopelessness to buoyancy, from ends to beginnings.

So, Easter should be a time when we're open to transformation and renewal in our lives. When we look for the courage to face the future unafraid. When we find the strength to build new communities on firm foundations of love, justice, and peace.^{xxii} As we sang in the opening hymn, "Jesus Christ is risen today...Soar we now where Christ has led...Living out the words he said...Alleluia."^{xxiii} Alleluia and Alleluia. Amen.

BENEDICTION*

Living God, astound us once again with signs of your presence.

In the withered corners of our love, may we be amazed with small, swelling buds.

In the dead center of our despair, astonish us with tender shoots of hope.

Into the frozen certainties of our endings, breathe warmth and fecundity,

That faith may flower again and exude the honey-damp fragrance of life.

Amen.

*Adapted from Virginia Rickeman, "Signs of Life," in *The Well is Deep: Prayers to Draw Up Living Water* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), p. 19.

NOTES

ⁱ Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12.

ⁱⁱ All of the information about Jesus in this paragraph and the next two is taken from the gospel of Luke, chapters 19-24.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 19:25-27.

^{iv} Mark 12:10, Matthew 21:42, Luke 20:17, 1 Peter 2:7,

^v Ephesians 2:19-20.

^{vi} 1 Peter 2:4-10.

^{vii} Herbert Thurston, "St. Joan of Arc." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). 28 Mar. 2013 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08409c.htm>

^{viii} Katherine Harrison, "Joan of Arc: Enduring Power," *New York Times* (January 5, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/06/opinion/joan-of-arc-enduring-power.html>

^{ix} Thurston, "St. Joan of Arc".

^x Malcolm X, from a 1963 interview with Louis Lomax, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=539>

^{xi} Stephen B. Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Mentor, 1985), pp. 381-407.

^{xii} Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* excerpted in James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 582.

^{xiii} Barack H. Obama, "Presidential Proclamation of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday," (January 18, 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/18/presidential-proclamation-martin-luther-king-jr-federal-holiday-2013>

^{xiv} Barack H. Obama, 2009 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html

^{xv} "Mrs. Roosevelt, First Lady Twelve Years, Often Called 'World's Most Admired Woman'," Obituary in the *New York Times* (November 8, 1962), <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1011.html>

^{xvi} "Winston Churchill", <http://www.history.com/topics/winston-churchill>

^{xvii} John 10:10.

^{xviii} Luke 12: 22, 25.

^{xix} Matthew 25:31-46.

^{xx} Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12

^{xxi} Matthew 5:7.

^{xxii} Jane Parker Huber, "O God, to Whom We Sing," hymn of 1983.

^{xxiii} Charles Wesley, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," hymn of 1749, as amended.