

## A Piece of the Rock

*“I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death will not prevail against it.” -- Matthew 16:18*

Prayer: *Spirit of the living God, you are the caretaker of our souls. We have been waiting and searching, experiencing a desert in our souls. Clear away the dead growth of the past; break up the hard clods of custom and routine; cultivate and water and tend our hearts. Fill us with the seeds of your word until new life buds and flowers within us. Amen.*

This morning our given Gospel lesson talks about a “rock.” Have you ever noticed how fascinated people are with rocks? Remember, the Christmas craze during the mid-70’s when a creative entrepreneur made a fortune on something called a “Pet Rock.” We know people who have designed gardens around their rocks. In fact, I have a brother-in-law who made considerable extra income selling rocks ... by the pound ... for gardens and landscaping.

I am sure everyone here has been to the Grand Canyon and seen the world’s most beautiful display of rock. And on the way back to the Valley do not most of us take that side trip to see the “red rocks” of Sedona? A few here spend their free time working in the lapidary shop. Then some of us have an insurance company that over the years has based its public image on buying “a piece of the rock.”

In our scripture we have read, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but God who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:17-18) In those two verses we have one of the most controversial pieces of scripture in the history of the Christian Church.

The Roman Catholic Church established the Papacy on this statement by Jesus and gave great power to the office of the Pope. These words are seen as the authorization by Jesus to Peter to be the head of the Church ... and those chosen to succeed Peter as the papal head of the Roman Church. Each succeeding Pope has been elected to follow in the steps of Peter and to have the authority of Peter ... “... and on this rock I will build my church.”

As you might expect the Protestant understanding goes in a slightly different direction. There has never been a denial of the “choosing of Peter.” Peter was chosen by Jesus for a definite task of leadership as the Church was being born. But from our perspective, the “rock” in these verses is not Peter, the man, but rather is seen as a reference to the faith of Peter. The “rock” is the constant, undeviating, strong, firm, solid and enduring faith of Peter.

Jesus knew that the future Christian community would need people with “rock-like” faith who would be constant, enduring, and solid. The Church needed people who were not just intelligent or prestigious, ... but people who had faith ... faith as enduring and immovable as a rock! People with “rock-like” faith would serve as solid and firm foundations for the church in the years to come.

That “rock-like” faith has come to mean many things to many different people over the years. For many people the “rock-like” faith has been symbolized in the Church itself. It may be a great cathedral in a large city or a small wooden-framed building along a country road. The church may have a great organ or an out-of-tune piano. The church may have beautiful stained glass windows or there may be cracks in the glass patched with dried-out tape to prevent winter drafts.

The church may also be symbolized in other terms: in the woman who has always been there to help anyone who came with needs, ... or in the pastor who said what seemed to be the right words when your husband died, ... or that welcoming friend who greeted you when you knew no one ... and you so desperately needed supportive friends.

The Church may be many things. One fact is always true, regardless of what happens or what critics say, the Church is always here! The Church is timeless, endless, triumphant, and always present! The Church is the rock – the rock of Christ, “the Son of the living God.”

We live in a day and an age when there is great change. There are countless examples of change that we see and experience everyday. As we watch television we see colossal transformation around the world. Needless to say, no one of us could have predicted the events leading to a regime change in Egypt, or now maybe in Libya and Syria. Nor could any of us have predicted the war in Iraq and Afghanistan would still be going on ten years later.

Yes, our world is changing. We see change as we drive down Bell Road. You can see changes as you drive through downtown Phoenix with the erection of two stadiums and the development of many new shopping areas. You can see changes as you drive Interstate 10 to the airport and every year there are new sites along the way. You can see changes too in South Phoenix as you travel through some of the poorest neighborhoods and hundreds of people are living in poverty.

We can see change even as we come into Faith Presbyterian Church. After decades of service by Davis Illingworth and Fran Park, ... and now so many deaths of dear friends. Yes, our world is changing and so often, this change is frightening! We do not like change with something that is always lost. With change, important things of the past become only memories. We do not adjust well to change, and we sure wish we could stop it. But we can't!

Yet, in the midst of all that is changing in our world and our lives the Church is a rock! The Church is the rock of “Christ, the Son of the living God.” The Church is the source of our constant, undeviating, and immovable faith. The Church is the solid and firm foundation for our living.

You know something ... we all need ... ***A Piece of the Rock!*** We all have that emptiness within us ... and we need the Church as the source of our faith; that guidance for our daily living; that firm foundation for our years and our tears; that rock that offers us the strong, constant, undeviating, solid, enduring, and immovable “rock-like” faith of Peter.

We all need ***A Piece of the Rock!*** Just think about history for a minute: ... kingdoms have toppled, ideologies have come and gone, fads have had “their time in the sun,” ... wars have put humans at their lowest, and families have fought and even hated, but despite its obvious imperfections, the Church has endured! The powers of death have not prevailed over the Church. The Church is a rock – the rock of “Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Now in a very different direction. Elaine Pagels starts her book *Beyond Belief* (see page

3-4, book is in our church library) with a powerful personal story. To put this story in perspective, Dr. Pagels is a professor of philosophy who likes to argue and challenge traditional beliefs of Christianity and the worthiness of the Church.

As she was out for her morning run on one cold Sunday in New York City, she stopped at the entrance of an Episcopal church just to warm her chilly bones. Just two days earlier, her 2½ yr. old son, Mark, had been diagnosed with a lung disease that is always fatal. She writes.... “Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation, and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice.

As I stood watching, a thought came to me: here is a family that knows how to face death.

“The day after we heard Mark’s diagnosis—and that he had a few months to live, maybe a few years—a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help? It couldn’t, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day’s ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart—literally—and die.

We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark’s blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit, and carried him home. “Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.”

We all need a *Piece of the Rock*. Maybe you remember a particular scene from Tom Clancy’s movie entitled *The Hunt for Red October*. The scene occurs near the end of the movie while the Russian sub, which has defected and has on board a small crew of Russians and Americans, maneuvers away from the pursuing Russians forces.

Ryan, the American, is in conversation with Borodin, the Russian defector. “Thank God for that,” Ryan breathed with relief. “You are a believer?” Borodin asked. “Yeah, sure,” Ryan responded. “Hell, you gotta believe in something.”

“And why is that, Commander Ryan?” Borodin inquired. Ryan wondered how to answer. “Well, because if you don’t, what’s the point of life? That would mean Sartre and Camus and all those characters were right – all is chaos, life has no meaning. I refuse to believe that. If you want a better answer, I know a couple of priests who’d be glad to talk to you.”

Sisters and brothers in this church family, I come to you today to simply say, we all need a *Piece of the Rock!* We need that community of people to call “home” and to give us roots in a world that seems so rootless. The Church can give us the place and the people to help us to cope with all that happens in our lives.

The Church can be that source of our constant, enduring, and immovable faith. And like Elaine Pagels, may we know that “... here is a family that knows how to face death. ... a place to weep ... a community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.”

The Church can be the enduring and firm foundation for all our days. The Church can be

the rock of “Christ, the Son of the living God.” And . . . we all need a ***Piece of the Rock!***

Scriptures: Isaiah 22:19-23; Matthew 16:13-20