

**“Look for the Cairn”**  
**1 Peter 2:2-10**  
**Rev. Leah Reed**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**May 7, 2023**

I’ve always believed that hiking is kind of an art form. People who do it well have the ability to keep a watchful eye on both what’s on the ground, and what’s ahead. They’re making sure their steps are ordered and careful. They have this innate instinct to see how closely they need to step in order to not trip and fall, in addition to knowing the direction they need to go to follow the trail. Hikers are master multi-tasters, they can carry a load on their back all while managing unpredictable weather conditions, holding a compass in their hands, not to mention the athleticism and sheer agility that it takes to climb a mountain. And folks, this is why I’m not a hiker — I don’t do any of that. I like the idea of hiking, but once I’m halfway up the mountain, I’m looking around going — who talked me into doing this, when are we stopping for a bathroom break, and where are my snacks? The sweat, the blisters — it’s just not my idea of a good time.

The last time I went hiking was in the North Carolina mountains with a group of 15 teenagers. You probably know where this is going. We were on a weekend retreat in Asheville, and during our Saturday free time we took a trip up to Mount Mitchell. I remember starting off on what seemed like an easy walk through the woods. It was slightly downhill, but a manageable pace. There was this picturesque, clearly defined path blanketed by shady trees. The trail was so easy that we were all signing songs, doing little youth group chants, and telling dad jokes. After about 30 minutes of feeling like we were just taking a stroll, things changed pretty dramatically. I got turned around, and just couldn’t find the trail anymore. We took a turn and started traveling UPHILL. The path turned into more of just a collection of jagged rocks jammed into the side of the mountain, and we found ourselves climbing. The trail was nowhere to be found. Let me pause here and say that it’s one thing to be doing this type of hike perhaps with a friend, maybe on your own, but when you’ve got 15 teenagers yelling 10 feet behind you, you REALLY need to know where you’re going!

We eventually came to a clearing that was marked by a peculiar stack of rocks. Maybe you have seen these at various places out in nature, but I had never seen one before. Six stones, carefully placed on top of each other, graduating in size from largest on the bottom to smallest at the top. They were sitting at a place on the side of the mountain that made us all stop in our tracks and notice. And

when I looked beyond the stack, there it was! I could see a clearly defined trail immediately behind these rocks. Someone carefully placed these stones on the path to send a message to fellow hikers although I don't know what the intent of that message was. Maybe they stopped to take a water break, and stacked these rocks for the perfect social media post? Maybe they had a spiritual experience on the trail and they wanted to mark where that moment happened? Maybe like me, a hiker got turned around and they knew that someone else might need a little help discerning the path forward.

These rocks stacks are called cairns. They have been found all over the world and have prehistoric origins. From the Americas to the Scottish Highlands to the beaches of Aruba, these stacks have been used by different cultures and civilizations for a variety of reasons. One of the most common uses of cairns is as trail markers or wayfinding tools, particularly in mountainous or remote areas. They have been used to mark Neolithic burial grounds in what is now Scotland, they've guided nautical travels in Scandinavia, and served as shrines to the Inca goddess in Peru. In some cases, they have been used as memorials to honor the dead, with stones being added to the stack over time to commemorate important individuals or events. They have even been used as defensive structures, with stones being piled up to create walls or barriers to protect against enemy attacks. While their specific uses and meanings may vary depending on the context and culture in which they are found, cairns remain a powerful symbol of human ingenuity, creativity, and connection to the world around us.

In the epistle lesson from today's reading, the apostle Peter is writing this to a new group of people who are living as aliens in a foreign land, and they were facing persecution and suffering for their faith. This entire book of 1 Peter reflects the rapid expansion of the early church in Asia Minor, and he explores these issues of community, mission, and suffering. We can trust that these are all issues that young communities of faith must have been facing during those days. Peter encourages them to hold fast to their faith in Christ and continue to live in a way that reflects their identity as God's chosen people.

Peter started out his life as a fisherman. He lived with his wife in Capernaum, where they shared a house with his mother-in-law and his brother Andrew. He and Andrew had their own boat, and they were in business with James and John, Zebedee's sons. The first time Jesus ever laid eyes on Peter, he says, "So, you're Simon, the son of John?" And then from that moment on he'd call him Cephas, which is Aramaic for Peter, which is Greek for "rock." So Jesus calls Peter "the rock," and it stuck with him for the rest of his life — Peter the Rock. It is

fascinating that in this passage he uses this multi-faceted, rich metaphor of a living stone. To state the very obvious, stones are not living things. They don't move or change or grow. They're not the most beautiful thing in creation, or the fanciest. They don't have intellect or the ability to reason. However, get out of the way if a large one gets rolling in the wrong direction, and once a stone stops, it's pretty much there to stay!

Peter was not particularly known for saying and doing the right things. He often times missed the point, asked the wrong question, and usually just didn't get it. The day he saw Jesus walking on the water, he tried to walk out to him himself. And since rocks have never been good at floating, he was just about to go under for the third time, and Jesus came to the rescue. Once when Jesus was talking about forgiveness, Peter asked how many times you were supposed to forgive any one person — seven times maybe? Jesus turned on him and said that after you'd forgiven him (seventy times seven) you were just starting to get warmed up.

Another time Jesus was talking about heaven, and Peter wanted to know what sort of special deal people like himself got, people who'd left home and given up everything the way he had, to follow Jesus; and Jesus took it easy on him that time, and said he'd get plenty, and so would everybody else. At their last supper, when Jesus started to wash the disciples' feet, it was Peter who protested — "*You wash my feet!*" — and when Jesus explained that it showed how they were all part of each other and servants together, Peter said, "Lord, not my feet only but my hands and my head!" At that same meal, Jesus said he would have to be going soon, and because Peter didn't get what he meant or perhaps couldn't face it, he asked about it. Peter finally got the point then and asked *why* he couldn't follow. "I'll lay down my life for you," he said, and then Jesus said to him the hardest thing Peter had ever heard him say. "Listen, listen," he said, "the cock won't crow till you've betrayed me three times."

And so it was. Peter sat out in the high priest's courtyard keeping warm by the fire while, inside, the interrogation was in process, and then he was asked three times if he was one of them, and each time he replied that he didn't know what in God's name she was talking about. That's Peter. Fickle, sometimes dense — appropriately named ROCK. And yet, we learn in the gospel of Matthew that he was called by Jesus to be the very foundation of the church. How can the church be built upon a man who would deny Jesus? Certainly there had to have been someone who was more dependable, more reliable, more credible. Even so, Jesus chooses Peter.

This living-stone metaphor goes a bit deeper as Peter references allowing ourselves to be built into spiritual houses, with Christ as the cornerstone. We have been on this corner since 1859, but this spiritual house has been around since 1812. We are sitting in the physical manifestation of old stones. Our stone steps are so old that they will be demolished next week. But friends, there is a lot of life still left in this body. In the course of a week at this church, we have had worship, Bible study, AA & Naranon groups, we hosted a community listening session around the affordable housing crisis in our city, a Mother's Day tea for the preschool moms, our clothing ministry hosted refugee groups, and last night in our fellowship hall...there was a square dance. I have to believe that this is part of what Peter was referring to when he talked about the living stones that make up the work of building up the Church. Each stone is alive, active, dynamic, nimble, and we are adapting to the community around us. And we will continue doing that as we dream dreams for the future. Every single stone deeply matters to the construction of the Church. Each person who walked in our doors this week makes up the diverse, beautiful, spiritual house that we get to call First Baptist Church. And as we think about the next 211 years, we are just getting started!

Bart Campolo is a speaker, writer, and counselor who serves as the Executive Director of Caravan, a community center in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is the son of the great leader of the red letter christian movement, Tony Campolo. Bart tells this story about being the director of an inner-city ministry in Cincinnati that was for teenagers, but they had a particular mission to be a safe place for young guys that were involved in gangs. There was a basketball court, homework rooms, and TVs, and as they started forming relationships the community center served as a hub, a gathering place away from the magnetic pull of gang activity that was happening on the streets. Bart had made some good connections with a particular group of guys, so he decided to take them on a weekend retreat to the outskirts of Ohio where they could get away from the city and build stronger relationships. He loaded up a rusty old 15-passenger van that had been donated from a church to the community center, and they set out on their weekend retreat.

They left town on Friday night, and a few hours into their trip they heard a loud pop! The van started to swivel, shake, and fishtail, and Bart slammed on the brakes just in time to guide it off to the grassy side of the road. He got out of the van and saw that one of the tires had completely ripped to shreds, chunks lying behind the van all over the road. At this point he wasn't even sure if he had a spare tire because this was a donated, beat-up, discarded church van, remember? And then in a comically horrible turn of events, a thunderstorm rolled in, and it started

not only to rain, but hail. At this point every face and eyeball inside that van was just pressed to the window, wide-eyed, watching Bart to see what he was going to do. It was dark, it was hailing, he couldn't find a flashlight, at this point he didn't know if he had a spare tire, and he had eight guys in the back of this van waiting on him to do something. And Bart just snapped — he lost it. For a good two minutes he yelled out into the wilderness as loud as he could, and this yell included a few choice words. He got back in the van, apologized to the guys for losing his temper, and took a deep breath. They all waited on the side of the road and eventually the hail stopped, the thunderstorm passed, and by some miracle they located a spare tire, he found a flashlight underneath a seat, and changed the tire. He was mortified, horribly embarrassed that he lost his cool in front of the guys. He was sure he had ruined the weekend for everyone.

They ended up having a good rest of the weekend, and everyone got home safely, but one of the guys, James, left his bag on the van. So Bart went to his house that Sunday to return his stuff. James answered the door and Bart gave him the bag. (James had been a skeptical attendee on this trip. He was new to the group and wasn't a church-goer. He mainly just came to the community center for the free basketball court — but his friends were going on the trip and he wanted to spend time with them.). Bart said to James, "Listen man, I'm glad you came on the trip, here's your bag you left on the van, hope to see you at the center next week." And Bart started walking off. He was exhausted and still a little embarrassed about the tire changing incident. He wasn't trying to have a long conversation. James said to Bart, "Hey wait up, can you talk to me more about this faith stuff?" Bart was stunned. Again, James was new to the group, Bart didn't even have a relationship with him, and he was certain that after his outburst he wouldn't want anything to do with him. Bart replied, "Absolutely." James said, "Yeah, I wasn't real sure about this whole thing until I saw you cursing on the side of the road changing that tire. I decided then that if you can follow Jesus, I probably can too."

We never know what God might use as a living stone. I'll never know the intent of that cairn that we found on that summer day in the NC mountains, or who put it there, when, and why, but on that day, when I got off course and essentially took a group of 15 teenagers mountain climbing, that little rock stack saved my life. We got back on course, the hike was manageable again, and it led us all the way back to our church van. Friends, the gospel is lived out on earth through (to borrow a phrase from Rachel Held Evans) "messed up oddballs" like you and me. And yet God chooses US every single day to be the ones who announce this all-inclusive

love to the world. We are the chosen, flawed, beloved people of God, for better or worse. Amen.