

Rocky Road

TEXT: Luke 19:28-40

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 24, 2024

In 2007, I visited Israel for the first time on a typical Holy Land tour. The spots that I found both the most moving and the most ridiculous each involved rocks. The most ridiculous was at the site associated with Jesus' ascension into heaven. In the center of the relatively small Dome of the Ascension was a mostly flat stone little more than a foot and a half square. The guides pointed out that, if you looked hard enough, you could see the imprint left by Jesus' foot as he ascended. Now, perhaps my eyes are just faulty, but it seemed like an Emperor's New Clothes moment to me.

Of course, we visited many sites—both traditional and non—for various events in Jesus' life, including descending into a rock cave where some believe Jesus was born. But my own sense of “wow, it could have been here” was almost always overridden by the ornate and multiple layers of churches and shrines built—often to compete with each other—over the most sacred places. Not that they weren't lovely, but it took a lot of imagination to try to put myself back 2,000 years and imagine the spot as it might have been then.

But there was one place that provided the “wow” moment I was looking for, the assurance that Jesus absolutely must have put his feet exactly where I put mine. It was on the stone steps leading down from the house of the high priest, Caiaphas, to the Kidron Valley. No one has ever built a church or a shrine over those steps. They are there now, as they were then, worn down exactly as you would expect after thousands of years and millions of people ascending and descending on them. As far as I could tell, they are as they were, except for the wearing of time, weather, and feet on stone.

The picture I used with my Messenger blurb on Friday (and that will be the thumbnail for this video on YouTube) is a picture of those steps. The Gospels tell us that, after his arrest, Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest. Whoever you think Jesus was or wasn't, he walked those exact steps in the last hours of his life. In that one place alone, I knew I walked where Jesus walked, and it moved me. Our guide hurried us along, but I so wanted to linger on the stone—the one place no one felt needed “improvement” to mark the holy—maybe because no one thinks rocks are all that special. I disagree.

My feelings about rocks color the way I read today's passage from Luke. All four gospels give us some version of Jesus' descent from the Mt. of Olives to the gates of Jerusalem, as his followers wave branches, put their cloaks on the road, shout Hosanna, and call Jesus a king. That kind of show is exactly what the religious leaders did NOT want; and Luke tells us that they tried to get Jesus to shush his disciples. Remember from a few weeks ago, that the rules for disciples included doing whatever the rabbi told them to do. So, Jesus *could* have silenced them—and there are plenty of other instances before this when Jesus does tell his followers to be quiet about what they have seen and heard.

But Luke tells us that Jesus not only refuses the request of the leadership to silence his followers, he tells them that it would be pointless. If all the people were silenced, he said, the rocks would do the shouting on their behalf.

Rocks figure as prominently in the Bible as they do in Israel's landscape. A legend you can hear told by some Holy Land tour guides is that, at creation, God sent angels across the earth carrying bags of stones to scatter across the land. But two of those angels collided over Israel and dropped their bags, which is why there are so many rocks. I'm guessing a couple of other angels must have run into each other over New England, and we have the stone walls to prove it.

From Genesis onward, the Bible is full of rocks. Jacob uses one as a pillow in Genesis 28 when he has the dream immortalized in the song called Jacob's ladder. In many places in the Bible stones are piled up to mark special events, places, and boundaries. Jesus tells a parable about how building your house on rock is better than building your house on sand. Insurance companies have finally gotten that memo and Florida homeowners are paying the price!

Stones, of course, make great building material—whether stairs or temples or sheep pens—and very large outcroppings of rocks have caves that are more than serviceable homes for many species, including our own. At the same time, rocks are an instrument of execution, as people in the Bible, and in some places still, are stoned to death. And as much as a stone house offers protection, stone isn't great for growing things. When Jesus tells a parable about scattering seed, the seed that falls on rock doesn't do as well as the seed that finds fertile soil.

The stories and uses for rocks in the Bible are many, likely because anyone in Israel searching for a tool, building material, or simply a good way to make a point just had to look down. Every road was a rocky road. Every building incorporated stone, especially as you moved from the more arable land in the north to the mountains around Jerusalem and points further south and west. And, holy moly, the energy pouring off of those stony mountains in the wilderness around the Dead Sea was palpable. I was surprised it didn't knock our bus off the road.

Maybe with so many rocks, it made people dream of changing some of them into other things. In Luke alone we have John the Baptist in chapter three warning people not to rely on their heritage as descendants of Abraham to be worthy in God's sight. No, he says, they need to repent of their sin because, "I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." In the next chapter, Satan is in the wilderness tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread. And in our passage Jesus points out that the rocks themselves could shout out, presumably without turning into children of Abraham first.

It's totally fine to hear Jesus saying the rocks would shout as just a symbolic way of saying that the truth will not be silenced. That's a good, and I think truthful, point to make; and it's one the Bible makes in many places. It's also a point that has resonance for us today in a world that is starkly divided not by opinions about facts, but by the nature of the facts themselves.

And here comes artificial intelligence, making it even harder to discern whether we are arguing with a real human or a bot; or whether the photo or video before our eyes or the sound we hear on a robocall or podcast has been altered or even just fabricated out of whole cloth. Earlier this month the League of Women Voters filed a federal lawsuit against the creators of a deepfake robocall that impersonated President Biden's voice telling New Hampshire voters not to participate in January's New Hampshire primary. And that AI technology is still in its infancy. So, it can be a very helpful thing to remember that the truth can ring out from unexpected places when the din of human voices subsides.

The Bible offers us truth in many forms; and what we hear in its stories is shaped by our own life's experiences as well as the context and culture of our particular time and place. In 2021 I preached here at Crawford about this same text; and my main point then was that the truth was being shouted more frequently by those *outside* the church because those of us *within* it had largely fallen silent. I think that point is still valid, too.

But here in 2024, that same text is hitting me differently. In 2021 I saw the rocks as representing people outside the group of Jesus' professed disciples. Today, I see something different. Today, I'm not seeing rocks as children of Abraham or as loaves of bread or as symbols of another human population. Today I'm thinking about rocks as just that...rocks. Rocks that—somehow, some way—shout. Rocks whose messages run down the slopes of mountains with the force I felt from the surrounding stone as I rode down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and then on to the Dead Sea in 2007.

To get at this, remember that the Bible is full of plants and animals praising God or otherwise involved in God's work here on earth. In Isaiah 55 the trees of the field clap their hands and the mountains and hills burst into song. In Psalm 148, praise comes from the sun and moon. In Psalm 96 the seas and the fields get their turn, along with the trees of the forest.

In Numbers 22 a donkey obeys God when Balaam, the prophet riding on the donkey's back, does not; and, when Balaam keeps beating the donkey for not moving and the donkey just lays down in front of the angel (that the donkey alone can see), God allows the donkey to speak up about his mistreatment. You would be forgiven if you heard the voice of Eddy Murphy saying, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?"

And it's not just donkeys that are complaining about their treatment. In Romans 8:22, Paul tells us that "All of creation has been groaning for its redemption." We're just now learning that trees communicate with each other through vast systems of root and fungi, sending warnings of harmful insects making their way across the forest groves and sharing the nutritional benefits of both sun and water, at least within the same species. Read *The Hidden Life of Trees* by German forester Peter Wohlleben; it will forever change how you see trees. Early last year a study was published showing that plants make different kinds of clicking sounds when under various kinds of stress.

Throughout my lifetime I've been shocked every time someone produces a long, expensive study showing complex communication and thought patterns in various kinds of animals. I'm not at all shocked that they found those things; I'm shocked that such communication wasn't assumed in the first place.

I mean when the Orcas started teaming up and attacking yachts along the European coast over the past year, those who study Orcas popped up to tell us that well, yes, Orcas not only are capable of learning behaviors—as any trip to Sea World can tell you—but, in the wild, they teach behaviors to other orcas and even adopt fads that they spread amongst themselves. If you want to be both amused and blown away, Google "Orcas wearing dead salmon as hats." Those living close to and studying Orcas saw that fad hit the wild Orca population in 1987.

For those who see the human species as supreme beings and all the rest of creation as mute objects, scattered about the earth for us to use and consume in whatever way suits us, then you are likely discreetly dialing the people in white coats to come cart off the pastor who's talking about Orcas and their dead-salmon hat fetish. But for those who look on a tree and see another being that God has made, or who have shared life with wild things in wild places for any length of time, you begin to see and experience the world differently.

Born in 1878, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote about the philosophy of relationship and dialogue. His most famous work, which I read in seminary, is titled *I And Thou*. The book is all about the magical moment when we encounter another being, human or otherwise, as a subject—I-Thou—rather than as an object—I-It. An I-Thou relationship happens when we see something of ourselves in the other, while an I-It relationship exists when we only encounter others as objects for our own use or pleasure.

The ultimate "Thou" for Buber is God, which is why we were reading it in seminary, but it was in Buber that I first saw in print what I have known my entire life: The world of Thou's—those I see as relationship partners to me rather than objects present to serve me in some way—need not be limited to humans. Buber tells us that we can have I-Thou relationships with every bit of the created order—animal, vegetable, mineral, sea and sky, sun and stars—but also objects that have themselves been crafted for utilitarian purposes by others.

If you've ever had a relationship with a house or a car; a piece of furniture or a stuffed animal, you've had an I-Thou relationship with something totally other. It's the moment when the sun and moon, as St. Francis put it, become "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon." There's a much broader world of life, meaning, and purpose than most of us were ever raised to recognize.

I read this morning's passage about the rocks crying out; and I remembered walking down the worn stone steps from the house of Caiaphas, and wishing that I could stop and learn what those stones had seen and what they knew. And I remembered feeling the power of the stony mountains wash over me, giving me energy I didn't think possible there at the bottom of the world. I thought about all those stones had seen across the millennia.

Then I remembered that we begin Lent with God's words to Adam, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." Before we were dust and ash, which lies on the earth's topmost layer, we were rock and fire. Even now, on the southwest peninsula of Iceland, magma from the earth's molten core is bubbling up, flowing out, and will over time cool and become rock. Maybe on Earth Day we should say, "Fire you are; and to stone you shall return."

Christian doctrine teaches that God's Word—not the Bible, but the *logos*, the Word of God that became incarnate in Jesus—was present at creation; when the earth was fire, becoming, over vast epochs of time, the Third Rock from the sun. And with the touch of God's hand, from this rock that still lies beneath our feet, life in its billions of molecules and millions of distinct species emerged.

Did the rocks cry out songs of praise as their fire spewed up from the earth's core into the gasses condensing around it? Did the rocks shout, "Look at this!" as carbon took on new forms? When Jesus looked at the many,

many rocks around him, did he know them as I-Thou? Did he ask them if they had known his ancestor, King David; or if David had walked where he walked then?

Did Jesus say the rocks would shout God's truth because he knew that, in the clacking, rolling language of stones, they had already done so? On Easter morning, did the stone actually need any assistance to roll away from the tomb; or did it, maybe, just do a favor for a friend?

I know, I know. I need a long vacation. But I give you a lot of heady, intellectual stuff on most weeks—deep dives into the world of the Bible and deep thoughts about how God may be speaking to us this day through this ancient text. But every now and again the Bible points us to the other ways that God speaks, and has always spoken, to those with ears to hear; things that require an open heart rather than a keen intellect to understand. Maybe, if we don't want the rocks to have to speak *for* us; we should think about what they might be saying *to* us, in this brief moment of geologic time that God has given us to hear them. Amen.