

# Stones & Rocks, Rooms & Homes

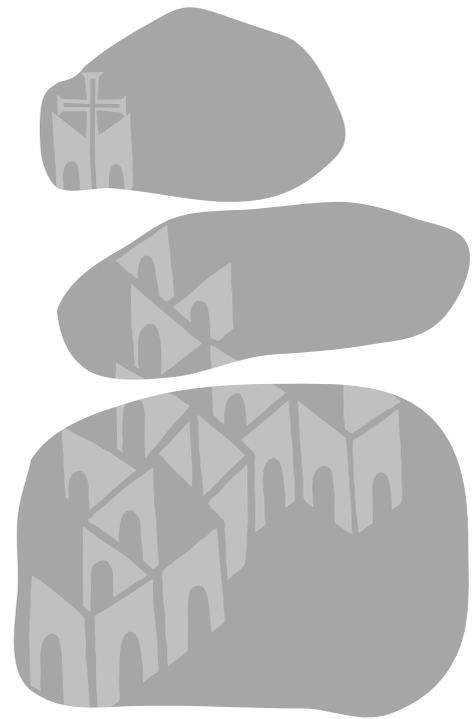
Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA

**Sermon - 5 Easter A, 2020**

Texts: Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-15; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

**By Rev. Dee Pederson, D.Min. - Director for Evangelical Mission**

Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.... In my Father’s house are many dwelling places.” Or as some translations say, “mansions” or “rooms.” Right now, I have a new appreciation for that promise, because for the past 6 weeks, THIS has been my “ROOM”: a kid’s bedroom transformed into my home office.



But mine isn’t the only “Zoom room” seen by others these days. Many of us spend hours a day connected to people in dozens of Zoom rooms. These are our “many rooms” today.

Twice a day, our synod staff gathers together from their rooms, and all of us connected on one screen. **Together.**



In addition, your pastors, deacons, and leaders regularly Zoom-in from their rooms: and suddenly, one room literally becomes MANY rooms as we Zoom-in together. As you can see, they’re not “mansions.” And after 6 weeks, most of us would say there aren’t enough rooms in any of our homes to keep us sane! ;-) But we’re blessed to have these places. The wish many have longed for so many times before, “*I wish I could just have a month to stay home!*” – has come true. And yet, we wish... it weren’t so.

We’re HERE because we ARE afraid. Afraid of....COVID-19 and getting sick; afraid for our parents and kids and front line workers; afraid for our jobs and the economy; afraid of death. And so we STAY in these rooms.... and then we realize we need to get out. So..... we walk.

Every day since Stay-at-Home began, I’ve taken a 2-mile walk from our house to the local quarry



Over 100 yrs ago, people from Europe immigrated to this area seeking a better life; and they worked in the granite quarries like this one.



- The granite shelf here runs +150 ft. deep; the stones run in rich veins of red and pink and charcoal grey.
- Stones were etched like this to indicate where the slabs would be
- The massive stones you see like this, were actually rejected for use back then. But they stand here as a testimony to the faith of our ancestors who worked here, and who sacrificed to organize Lutheran congregations where people could gather to hear the Gospel spoken in German or Swedish or Norwegian, where they'd sing and pray together, enjoy their favorite foods, treasure the community they shared in Christ, and pass on their culture to their children.

Many of those congregational church buildings still stand, of course; you know them well!

But today, those sanctuaries are empty. You know how we always said, "Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God" at the end of worship – and each and every person would go out the doors to BE body of X in the world?!

- We wanted the church to leave the sanctuary - be deployed - to be what it was always supposed to be in the world.

Well, it's come true! But in a way we never expected or wanted. And it's disorienting and it's hard work and it's frightening, and we feel like Philip who said, "Lord, we don't know where we're going!

*How can we know the way? Nobody prepared us for anything like this!"*

The Gospel story for this week is one that we often associate with funerals – read to assure family and friends that Jesus is taking care of their loved one into eternity, and to encourage all of us how to keep on living when our lives will never be the same again.

When Jesus spoke these words, they had a similar purpose.

- They had just shared the last supper they would ever eat together.
- Jesus washed their feet and commanded them to love one another as he loved them.
- He told them he would be with them only a little while longer.
- The glorious years of teaching, healing touch, shared meals, and singing psalms – would soon be a memory.
- In a short time, Peter the rock would deny him, by afternoon of the next day, Jesus would be crucified, and life would never be the same again!



Knowing they'd have a hard time handling all he told them, Jesus tried to prepare them for what was ahead. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."*

Well, how does that sound to you today? I remember how, when I was a kid, if a grown-up told me not to be afraid, I was pretty sure there WAS something I should be afraid of! Yet Jesus wants them to believe that even though HE'S not going to be beside them, his relationship with them will NOT change, and he will need THEM to keep on living the mission he had lived. And 2,000 years later, that's exactly what you are doing.

- You in congregations miss each other & just want to be together again.
- Your pastors are working harder than ever before. They've learned new technology, re-thinking every movement in worship, enlisting lay leaders to reach out to people who are homebound, and re-inventing faith-formation online when students are doing everything for school ONLINE. Many have suddenly become 24/7 home-schoolers, in addition to serving as your pastor; and the weight of all this is heavy.
- ALL of you have found life drastically transformed: setting up your own home office, teaching your kids, missing your grandkids & parents, working on the front lines, sewing masks, getting out to do spring planting, and worrying about what's going to happen with your retirement and meat processing and the economy.
- And we cry with Philip, "Lord, we don't have a clue how to navigate through a pandemic. How can we know the way?!"

I know that ALL of us have experienced crises in life, things for which we were never prepared: a sudden illness; the death of a spouse or parent or child; the loss of a job, ending of a marriage, end of a friendship. And again and again in my ministry, I have heard people remark, *“There’s no way I could have gotten through this experience without God’s presence – my faith – or my church.”*

I’m reminded of one of the amazing people I’ve had the pleasure of knowing in my ministry – Thorpe Running - whose funeral I presided 10 years ago, April 30. Thorpe was the son of Concordia College artist Cyrus Running. He was a professor of Spanish & Spanish Literature, and a recognized scholar of Latin American poetry. Thorpe studied the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinean author who said, *“Nothing is built on stone, everything on sand, but our duty is to build as if the sand were stone.”*

Thorpe was also an amazing tri-athlete, riding his bike to teach at St. John’s University daily. But in 1999, while on a training ride, Thorpe steered away from a patch of fresh gravel – loose rocks on the road - headed for the grass, and in an instant, his life was changed forever. I will never forget getting the call from his daughters, going to ER, and hearing that Thorpe would be a quadriplegic. I couldn’t believe it. Not this tri-athlete. Not because of some stupid gravel.

But Thorpe’s life was built on a firm foundation, and during the next 11 years, his heart didn’t turn to stone. He didn’t sit around in self-pity, nor wonder why this happened, or about the way forward. Instead, he simply became ever more compassionate, more perceptive, more courageous, more gracious to everyone. Supported by his wife, Cheryl, and surrounded by a circle of caregivers, Thorpe utilized his wheelchair & computer technology to teach his students, greet his friends, join in worship, and provide an unmovable presence to everyone who knew him. He knew who he was, and whose he was. He built his life as if the sand were stone.

Since mid-March, our country has been forced to decide how we are going to live when it feels like we’re on shifting sand, and we don’t know the way to go. We don’t choose the tragedies that come into our lives. Bad things happen because WE’RE not perfect; our bodies are not invincible to disease or injury; we hurt one another – intentionally and UNintentionally, and sometimes people suffer because of the brokenness of whole communities and nations. This disease. Right now. Makes it feel like everything around us is shifting.

And yet, in the midst of all the uncertainty, some things become stronger:

- Being “in this together” – being “at home – together” – has forced us to slow down, pay attention, sort out what’s important... and what we need to let go.
- After the 9-11 attacks, theologian Phyllis Tickle said that she saw the people of New York “burned through to compassion.” Today, each of us can name stories of generosity and compassion and loving actions ordinary people are taking just because they care.
- Our isolation is moving us to reach out to people we’ve lost touch with, and to visibly express our gratitude to the people sacrificing themselves to care for others, provide our food, protect our communities, keep things running.
- People have expressed a new spiritual hungering, and many are joining in worship services and opportunities for prayer for 1st time.
- YOU are experiencing how to be the church out of the building, in your homes, connected through screens & phones & FB & mail – by whatever means have been available in the place where you live.
- You’re connected to the other 234 congregations of our synod - across the geographical area of SWMN.
- You’ve known your need for God to be rock of refuge & strong fortress.
- You have experienced what it means to be living stones, built not into a sanctuary, but into a spiritual house.

There’s a story in the Old Testament that tells how King David offered to build God a beautiful house of cedar so God would have someplace to live. And God replied, *“You know, David, I’ve been doing very well leading you & living w/ you people wherever you went. Did I ever once complain and ask you to build me a house to live in? I claimed you and blessed you - I’ve been with you through everything. So here’s the deal: I will build YOU a house – that is, I’ll make you a house of PEOPLE. Down the road, OK, there will be a house built for me. But more important than that, is that YOU, my people, are my house – **the place where I most want to dwell.**”*

In the New Testament, the earliest followers of Jesus saw themselves as built together into God’s temple. Unlike their neighbors who worshiped various gods only in temples, Peter thinks of the early Christians themselves as stones. Worshipping in small, house-church communities of Jesus followers... these ‘living stones’ gathered together to sing psalms of praise, pray, and hear the words of Jesus, crucified and risen..



WE tend to think of church as a building: we're "going to church" – or we "can't go to church now." But in the New Testament, the word "church" appears once – only in Mt. – and it refers to the people "called out" to a meeting, called to assemble. Today the church is still being called out, still assembling – much like people did in those house-churches 2,000 years ago - not in a sanctuary, but with the safety and technology available to us today. And you are indeed doing that in a variety of ways:

- as a gallery of faces appear in a Zoom call;
- as greetings & emoji hearts rise in the chat; 
- as friends call each other on the phone to check on how they're doing, or share a Bible study;
- as people look through their contacts list, pray for the people there, and send a note;
- as people of all ages sew masks to keep people safe or share clothing for people who are homeless.....

Loving your neighbors as you bring healing & help & hope.

Jesus Christ continues to build you as the household of God transformed for today.

- *"Come to Christ, that living stone, rejected by people but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house."* (1 Peter 2)
- *"So then, you are... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."* (Ephesians. 2)

As much as you and I might feel alone today, as much as the isolation and loneliness threaten to overwhelm you, you are not alone. You are gathered into the embrace of Jesus Christ, the stone who WAS rejected, who knew every betrayal & denial & pain that you and I will ever know, and was finally put to death on a cross. Sometimes we wonder where God has gone; but if you want to see the very heart of God, then look to Jesus upon the cross, and see the length to which self-sacrificing love will go for you and for me and for the sake of this whole world.

And having seen him there, see him again on Easter morning, because it's there that you will see the power of God that rolled away the stone so that that life and love and light might turned loose on earth forever.

Dear friends, these are troubling days. We're afraid. We don't know much about the way to go. Life seems like shifting sand. But as the prophet said so long ago:

*"Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug."*

You stand on Jesus Christ – the cornerstone and foundation. You are living stones, connected – wherever your room may be, together - even though apart, because you are built into the household of God. Whether you are part of a church congregation, or a new friend dropping in today, you are precious in God's sight. In Jesus Christ, God is with you, and will never let you go.



**Southwestern Minnesota Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.