

## Message for May 16, 2021

### **John 21:15-19**

“The Bones of St. Peter” is the title of a book written by a John Walsh, and it is made up of a little bit of Bible study, history, and a whole lot of archaeology. While the Bible doesn’t say so, ancient tradition claims that the apostle Peter went to Rome where he became the leader of the local church. Tradition also claims that Peter was crucified during a persecution incited by the emperor Nero, and was then buried in Rome. His gravesite became a place of pilgrimage and in fact so many Christians went to his grave to pay their respects, that a church was built on the site. That church eventually evolved into the present-day St. Peter’s Basilica which is the home church of the Roman Catholic Pope.

It has long been said that Peter’s bones lay under the high altar in St. Peter’s, but this was just tradition and there was no proof of this whatsoever. Back in 1939 some archeologists were given permission to investigate and the great hope of course was that they would discover the long-lost bones of St. Peter. The results almost read like a mystery novel; there were mysterious inscriptions on ancient walls, and bones were discovered which were said to be Peter’s but then it was realized that they were actually those of a woman. Then came the discovery of yet more mysterious bones which made up half a skeleton. The investigation of them lasted for almost thirty years and involved scholars, archaeologists, and forensic scientists. In the end it was concluded that these are in fact the remains of Peter, though of course not everyone agrees with this conclusion. This book makes for fascinating reading but I realized that it was all about Peter the saint, but what about Peter the man? What was he like and what can we learn from his life?

The gospels tell us that Simon, or Peter as he is better known, was a fisherman in Galilee and possibly a follower of John the Baptist. Peter’s brother Andrew was one of the first to follow Jesus and he introduced Peter to him. Up to this point Peter had lived a very ordinary life, but after meeting Jesus his life would never be the same again. We don’t know what Peter thought when he first met Jesus, but Jesus was certainly impressed by him. Jesus invited Peter to follow him and even gave him a new name. No longer would he be called Simon, from now on he would be called Cephas which we translate as Peter. The name Peter simply means ‘rock’ and Jesus gave him this name because, as he said, Peter

was the rock upon which he was going to build his church. Rocky however is also a good description of Peter's personality and even his 'career' as a disciple.

Peter quickly established himself as the leader of the twelve disciples and was second only to Jesus himself, but even so his path was rocky indeed. Peter for example was the first disciple to realize who and what Jesus is. One day when Jesus asked the disciples who everyone thought he was, they all had an answer. Then, when Jesus specifically asked them what they thought, the only one who would answer the question was Peter. Peter said that Jesus was the Christ or the Messiah. So far so good but when Jesus went on to talk about his upcoming trial and death, Peter took him aside and told him off. None of these terrible things could possibly happen to the Messiah! Jesus in turn told Peter off and implied that Peter, in his ignorance, was acting like an agent of the devil.

There was the time when Peter and the rest of the disciples were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. They saw Jesus walking on the water towards them and Peter's response was to jump out of the boat and start walking to meet him. This of course was a tremendous demonstration of faith but then, when he realized the sheer impossibility of what he was doing, his faith failed him and he began to sink like a rock. He may well have drowned if Jesus hadn't lifted him up. And there is also the Last Supper when Jesus predicted that he would be forsaken by all. Peter's response was to brag and say that "Even if everyone else gets scared and runs away, I won't!" In the crunch however, he denied knowing Jesus, not once but three times.

Truly we may call Peter a saint but he was so very human too. He did have faith, but sometimes not quite enough. He thought that he was so brave and committed to Jesus, but he wasn't as brave or as committed as he thought he was. Truly Peter may have been the rock upon which the church was built and yet, he was also so weak and fallible. But while Peter may have been all of these things, positive and negative, he was something else too and that was forgiven.

In his gospel, John says that after the resurrection, the disciples returned home to Galilee and resumed their old careers. Peter went back to fishing and one night he and his companions caught nothing. A stranger on the beach called out and told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat which they did, and much to their surprise they caught the catch of a lifetime! It was then that they realized who that stranger was; it was Jesus. Ever the impulsive one, Peter promptly dove into the lake and swam to shore, leaving the others to bring in both

the boat and the catch. They all shared breakfast with Jesus but then something odd happened. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he truly loved him, and each time Peter's answer was 'yes'. But what was the point of this? It was simply to make up for the three times that Peter had denied knowing Jesus on that first Good Friday. Jesus did this to make it clear that Peter truly was forgiven, and it was knowing that he was forgiven that set him free and enabled him to move on without being haunted by the mistakes of his past. And this is what Peter did; while not perfect, he became the rock upon which the church was built. And in a sense, the story of Peter is our story as well.

Have we ever been like Peter and been so very sure of ourselves? We know who and what Jesus is. We know what is right and what is wrong. We know what God wants of us and we are so full of good intentions too. The things that we are going to do for God, the church, and others. We feel so faithful and committed; we feel as solid as a rock! But while we may sometimes feel along these lines, how often have we felt the exact opposite?

If we are honest, we realize that sometimes there is a gulf between our ideals and our reality. Too often perhaps, we say and do things that we know we shouldn't and neglect to say and do the things that we know we should. As St. Paul wrote: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do." Far from being like an immovable rock, sometimes we are more like the sand, swirled here or there by the wind or the current. But if and when we feel like this, we should remember that as it was with Peter, so it is with us; God loves us, forgives us, and restores us. And this sets us free.

J. D. Williams is the pen name of a lay person who once wrote a series of devotions for the devotional magazine, "These Days". In one of his devotions, he wrote about how he felt about being a virtual invalid at the age of forty-nine because of a heart condition. He wrote: "I feel like a china vase dropped on the concrete, as the owner carefully gathers the pieces and glues them together. Then Jesus picks me up, observes my cracks, and hands me to God. When God's hands hold me, I look at my body and observe no cracks. Our weaknesses do not prevent us from performing valuable tasks for the kingdom. Yes, we can be instruments of God's love with our cracks."

This was something that Peter discovered for himself. Who was he with all of his failures and shortcomings to be the rock upon which the church would be built? Who are we to be a part of that same church, carrying on his ministry, and

even that of Christ himself? And yet despite our sins, imperfections, and other shortcomings, this is what we do. We do because of who and what we are. In the words of Peter himself:

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

And so we have.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you are a God of love, mercy, and redemption.

We give you thanks that even as great as you are, you have called us with all of our weaknesses and frailties to be your people and to do your work.

We thank you for your promised presence with us on life’s journey. As we will remember next Sunday at Pentecost, no matter where we go or whatever happens, you are present with us and for us.

We pray for your loving, forgiving, redeeming presence in the lives of all your children this day, even as the pandemic continues. We remember all who are ill, who mourn and those who simply feel so isolated and overwhelmed by it all.

We pray too for that land that we like to call holy, as once again the strife escalates between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We pray for the safety and well-being of all and that there may be a just resolution to the conflict, that all your children both there and everywhere, may live in peace and security without fear. May the day come when your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and until that day comes, may we, secure in your love, do our best to live the lives and be the people you have called us to be. We ask these things in your Son’s name.

Amen