

DUMB AS A BOX OF ROCKS (?)

Rev. Mary Barrett Speers
Joshua 4:1-7, 19-24; Luke 19:36-40

There's a saying in the South: "She's as dumb as a box of rocks." And I have to confess, every time I collect pebbles on the beach, I think of that, about the time when I start looking around for something to put them in. How dumb, when you think about it, collecting pebbles on the beach. What am I looking for, in that next, forever unattainable, perfectly exquisite beach pebble?

So there I was, only last week, collecting these pebbles on the Isle of Iona on what they call Pilgrimage Day, when everyone gets a bag lunch (and the kitchen staff get a morning off) and you walk and sing and pray your way around the island, remembering the history of the saints there, and the gory tyrants buried there, and all the crofters banished from there, walking past innumerable sheep, who seem not to have changed for centuries, and cows chewing the cud with all the time in the world; and through it all, walking in the ocean breeze that rides the Gulf Stream all the way from Newfoundland, and drinking in the ancient natural beauty of the place.

At least this time I made sure to collect very small stones. I confess I collected Iona beach pebbles for you last year, too, actually, but my suitcase was so overweight that I had to leave them behind. "What've you got in there? Rocks?" "Yup."

Fortunately, last year, the airport motel had some plantings, neatly lined with smooth round pebbles. I just added mine in. Maybe the pebbles weren't really part of the decor, they'd just added up over the years as people weighed their bags on the baggage scale the hotel so thoughtfully provided, and then found the same solution I did.

So yes, this year I made sure to pick the really small ones—and not so many. I hope there will be enough for everyone. But there's a plan afoot to gather a group from SPC to go next year! And the pebbles I just poured water over are available, too. I've been collecting those for this baptism on West Meadow Beach for weeks now. And a geologist assured me that geologically, aeons ago, New England and the Maritimes and Ireland, Scotland, and parts of Scandinavia were all one continent. So these pebbles from both sides of the Atlantic have the same provenance. More or less.

But why did I collect Iona beach pebbles in the first place? I suppose it was because I was thinking of you all, and I wanted to bring a little bit of the place to you. You remember stories about people leaving their native land and bringing with them a little bit of earth from their old farm, a stone or two to remind them. A piece of the land.

Naaman did that in the Old Testament, remember? He asked for some of the Land of Israel to help him remember the God of the Land of Israel, who had healed him. And here today, much earlier than Naaman, the Children of Israel have at last, after forty years in the wilderness, crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. Joshua tells them to take up the stepping stones over which they had crossed, and set them up on a hill to remind them of God's parting of the Jordan for them—and thus, of God's parting of the Red Sea for their parents and grandparents as well.

And think about Samuel, those of you who come to Tuesday Bible study: "Then Samuel took a stone, and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." [I Samuel 7:12]

Stones aren't dumb at all, in the Bible. Not these stones. They tell a story. They remind us of things. And guess what: many of you have such a stone with you right now. It's your engagement ring!

And then we look outside—even as we worship, sometimes, there are people poking around our graveyard, looking for the stones of our ancestors in the faith who risked their lives for what they believed was right—even though many thought what they were doing was wicked. Yes, mostly now, to most people, they're characters on a TV show, but the appeal is that they really lived, and apart from the necessarily highly fictionalized account (there just isn't enough information to make three seasons' worth of script!) we know from history that if they'd been caught, they'd have been hung, and probably their families would have been turned off the farms as well.

Every morning and every evening, the Iona Community worships God in the abbey that long ago now, in the 1930's, they helped to rebuild. The evening service is creative and experiential—we've had some of their worship already, and we'll have more from this year as well—but the morning service, leading into our chores, is short, to the point, and pretty much always the same. It gets us down to business.

The Call to Worship is the same every morning, a series of couplets that spoke powerfully to the early East Glasgow stoneworkers and theological students whom George MacLeod gathered to rebuild the ancient abbey, and build community across lines of class and race and nationality while doing so.

Here's how it goes:

The world belongs to God:
The earth and all its people.
How good and how lovely it is
To live together in unity.
Love and faith come together,
Justice and peace join hands.
If the Lord's disciples keep silent
These stones would shout aloud.
Open our lips, O God,
And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Did you notice that all of these couplets, save one, come from the Psalms? And that one stands out, I think because of it. It comes, of course, from our Gospel reading today.

Jesus is talking about the stones of the Temple, the stones of the Holy City of Jerusalem, built on Mt Zion, the mountain where Abraham is believed to have taken Isaac, at God's command, no less, "to worship," as Abraham steadfastly tells his manservant when father and son go on alone together.

This reading comes from Luke's account of what we call Palm Sunday—and what does Jesus say? Not "worship me," but a warning against "keeping silent" *about the kingdom of God*. That was what Jesus was about: not his own divinity, but what the world looks and feels like when we all set fears aside and put God at the center of all of life. But, as Jesus says, the Reign of God is already spread among us and we do not see it. Life, as they say, is complicated.

It took me a day or two to recognize just how much each individual stone meant to those first workers, those tough, unemployed youth and privileged theological students who together first compiled those couplets to be said every morning, then as now. Sitting in the beautiful Abbey Church, I saw the stones in aggregate, in place, forming walls and steps and lintels and traceries.

But then I realized that when this Call to Worship first came together among the workers in this place, each stone had meaning to those men. They had, collectively with all who had done so before, handled, lifted, shaped, placed, each one of these stones. And in so doing, they had built a house for

God. They had built community. They had built the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God on earth, that reality Jesus told us is already all around us even if people don't see it.

This year, one of the exercises we did was to “interview” the Abbey—the building itself. What stories did these stones tell?

Well, one of the things one of us brought out was the presence of a large wrought iron grill around massive marble memorial sarcophagi of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, who donated the island of Iona to the country about a hundred years ago. So, on one level, we had what we see in many old churches, and in much old art: donors rather lavishly thanked.

But then we also remembered the tragic “Clearances”—how many crofters had been sent away, their farms burned, by absentee gentry who, down through the centuries, and through various cultural changes and legislation, had come to be thought to “own” land that had once been the communal property of the entire clan. And in fact, when I mentioned earlier those people bringing earth from their old farm, I was thinking about these very people, forced from their farms in order to support the lavish lifestyle of others.

But then, on the other hand, it was that same Duke of Argyll who had first begun the rebuilding of the Abbey, which MacLeod and his team of stoneworkers and theological students labored so hard to complete. And the Duke of Argyll could afford it, and it was right after the horrors of what was then thought to be the War to End All Wars, and in that tumultuous time he had a vision of an ancient cradle of Christianity being open again to all, for world peace.

And well, there's more to that story for some other time, but let's get back to Jesus, eating with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners—and then going to dinner with the likes of Nicodemus. And think of him, too, in those stories we *don't* like—when he killed a fig tree simply because it didn't give him what he wanted, or when he refused to help people outside his faith community until they themselves opened his eyes and expanded his vision. Life is complex. Life is full of paradox and contradiction. The full story of history is never tidy and clean.

So, when your children ask you, “What do these stones mean?” What do you tell them?

If they ask about your engagement ring, now—how do you talk to them about marriage? Is it hearts and roses and happily ever after? Or do you tell them that the hard times make marriage more precious than ever? Or is marriage very difficult, or even ending, right now, and you have a hard time knowing what to tell them at all?

And then...when you take your children to Mount Rushmore, let's say—do you tell them about the Presidents carved in the rock, why those particular men are there, and if they ask why only men, do you talk about that—and then, do you tell them about what that rock means to the Native Americans for whom the carving is a desecration? Do you tell them all of these things?

You remember that Palm Sunday itself is very much like that. It's exhilaration and looming dread, all rolled into one.

In fact, life itself is very much like that. It's beautiful and threatening and exciting and terrifying. A lot of it depends on where you stand at the moment, but some of it—well, some of it just *is*. As the Apostle Paul says, we are living simultaneously in the Already and the Not-Yet. There's work still to be done—and risks still to be taken. If we seek only safety and survival, we'll die. Our stories—our *story*—isn't over. God isn't done with us yet. And thank God for that.

At the end of morning worship in the Abbey of Iona, you don't sit down and pray silently and listen to beautiful music. You remain standing, because the rest of your day, your work and your play,

your happiness and your tears, are all your worship, too. Your whole life is worship, and the liturgy itself (“the work of the people”) is just one expression of that.

But sometimes, just sometimes, it helps to take a stone along, to have one of those stones around to remind you. Life means other people, and therefore misunderstandings, failures to communicate, hurt feelings, resentments, hurt, grief, and just plain disappointment. All, as Paul said, fall short of the glory of God.

But stones—especially the stones on the beach in Iona, and on our own beach as well, stones are, even the newest of them, older than just about everything else on earth. Stones have been worn down, but they’ve *lasted*. And sometimes, stones are ground down, washed down the current, and swirl around in hollows to become clay. And clay can be re-formed by hands, and *transformed* by fire, so God isn’t done with the world, or any of us, yet. I, for one, am sticking around for the ride.

And I don’t know about you, but I find the very mystery and apparent conflicts of life to be the most exhilarating thing about it. Inspiring, even. They’d better be, since at this moment in history, we sure have plenty of them. We indeed live, as you’ll remember, in...*interesting* times.

Think back about the stones, the markers, in your life. Do they mark long periods of stasis? Or do they mark transitions? What moments in your life do you remember as if it were yesterday?

Color theory tells us that it’s the transitions in art that draw the eye. It’s where light meets dark, or color lies next to color. Think of Mark Rothko’s color-field paintings. Or think of the L.L. Bean catalogue—all those turtlenecks stacked up: the colors absolutely vibrate when you see them all together.

Well, beach pebbles are beautiful, aren’t they? And, just like the turtlenecks in the L.L. Bean catalogue, they look most beautiful when all the colors are together. You could say they’re most beautiful when you see them *in relation to one another*. And as we’ve already recognized today with the children during Emma’s baptism, they’re also most beautiful when you...add water.

What do these stones say? Not the stones I brought here for you today, but the markers in your lives? When you think about it, really, there should have been a question mark at the end of my title today. Dumb as a box of rocks? Not really; in fact, not “dumb” at all!

AMEN.