

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Second Sunday of Easter – April 23, 2017 – Earth Day Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 20:19-31

For Reflection

"Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks. Also learn from holy books and wise people. Everything - even mountains, rivers, plants and trees - should be your teacher."

- Morihei Ueshiba, Japanese Athlete (1883-1969)

"It's so much easier to throw rocks than it is to govern."

- Karen Bass, American Politician (b.1953)

Rock Opera

For the record #1: The disciples were Jews. So, when John writes: "...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews..." he means they were afraid of the temple hierarchy – the men who turned Jesus over to the Romans for execution for the crime of blasphemy. They were not afraid of their own people generally.

For the record #2: The stone over the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away that morning. This story begins the same day as the resurrection and then continues one week later.

For the record #3: When Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side...." I immediately start singing:

"See me, feel me, touch me, heal me."

that unforgettable refrain from "Tommy" the Rock Opera released by The Who in 1969.

And that is why the title of this reflection for the week after Easter aka Earth Day Sunday is entitled "Rock Opera." That's just how this mind of mine rolls.

Does anyone know the camp song, "Jesus is The Rock and he rolls my blues away..." by Tony Congi? The chorus goes:

Jesus is the Rock and He rolls my blues away
(bop shoo bop, bop shoo bop!) x3

And then there's our hymn, "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me...Let me hide; my shelter be!" The lyrics from 1815 are based on Isaiah 26:4: "Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock..." as well as the crucifixion and burial stories in

the Gospel of John. This may be the hymn most deeply ingrained in my memory as my Dad used to whistle it regularly while working around the house.

How about you? What are some other songs about rocks that stick in your memory?

- “The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock...”
- Xx
- Xx

There must be a million anthems – including the one from this morning:
"Roll, Roll the Stone" by Joseph Martin

So, as the Rock Opera continues in our minds – let's focus on the “rock” part. Did you know that:

At a granular level, rocks are composed of grains of minerals, which, in turn, are homogeneous solids formed from a chemical compound that is arranged in an orderly manner...**Many rocks contain silica (SiO₂); a compound of silicon and oxygen that forms 74.3% of the Earth's crust...**

Rocks are geologically classified according to characteristics such as mineral and chemical composition, permeability, the texture of the constituent particles, and particle size. **These physical properties are the end result of the processes that formed the rocks. Over the course of time, rocks can transform from one type into another, as described by the geological model called the rock cycle. [Which brings to mind another opera, “The Ring Cycle” by Richard Wagner...]** These events produce three general classes of rock: igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic.

The three classes of rocks are subdivided into many groups. However, there are no hard and fast boundaries between allied rocks. By increase or decrease in the proportions of their constituent minerals **they pass by every gradation into one another, the distinctive structures also of one kind of rock may often be traced gradually merging into those of another. Hence the definitions adopted in establishing rock nomenclature merely correspond to more or less arbitrary selected points in a continuously graduated series.**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_\(geology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_(geology))

Did you get that? “...**they pass by every gradation into one another, the distinctive structures also of one kind of rock may often be traced gradually merging into those of another.**” Rocks, these solid, foundational objects used as metaphors for that which is unchanging – rocks undergo natural processes which cause them to alter their structure. Their classification is arbitrary depending on where they are in their particular stage of metamorphosis. *[By the way, **Metamorphosis Music** is an American record label owned by Capitol Records and founded in 2014 by singer Katy Perry. Just FYI.]*

We creatures who are made of dust – which, by the way is left-over rock material – we who are so afraid of change – are also undergoing natural processes which cause us to gradually (or even abruptly) alter our structures and merge into another sort of being. We are made of star-dust, rock leavings and water. We are sentient. So, there is no reason not to believe that rocks are sentient – that the earth is sentient – and knows exactly what is going on.

I heard a story about a White man who liked to explain Native American culture to other people. He was on a reservation, walking with a Native Elder, while throwing a stick for a dog.

He threw the stick the dog brought it back.

He threw the stick the dog brought it back.

He threw the stick the dog brought it back.

On one run, the dog came back with a stone.

Our White guy said, “Dumb old dog! I threw a stick, not a stone!”

The Native Elder stopped and looked at him. Then he said, “Who is dumb here?

Perhaps the dog heard the stone say, ‘I’ve been sitting here in one place for 1000 years. Would you please move me to a new place?’ Perhaps the dog hears more than you or I.”

- Thank you Alison Cameron

If you have ever been in a Jewish cemetery you might have noticed piles of rocks or stones on the graves and tombstones.

...stones have a special character in Judaism. In the Bible, an altar is no more than a pile of stones, but it is on an altar that one offers to God. The stone upon which Abraham takes his son to be sacrificed is called even ***hashityah***, the **foundation stone of the world**. The most sacred shrine in Judaism, after all, is a pile of stones — the Western Wall.

In the words of a popular Israeli song, “There are men with hearts of stone, and stones with the hearts of men.”

So why place stones on the grave? ...The superstitious rationale for stones is that they keep the soul down. There is a belief, with roots in the Talmud, that souls continue to dwell for a while in the graves in which they are placed. The grave, called a *beit olam* (a permanent home), was thought to retain some aspect of the departed soul. Stones are more than a marker of one’s visit; they are the means by which the living help the dead to “stay put.”

Flowers [*which you find in other cemeteries*] are a good metaphor for life. Life withers; it fades like a flower.... But the memory is supposed to be lasting. While flowers may be a good metaphor for the brevity of life, stones seem better suited to the permanence of memory. Stones do not die.

...In moments when we are faced with the fragility of life, Judaism reminds us that there is permanence amidst the pain. While other things fade, stones and souls endure.

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/putting-stones-on-jewish-graves/>

You may have noticed piles of rocks outside of cemeteries – even along wilderness trails. Our word for these comes from Scottish Gaelic – although the practice of building cairns has been around since prehistoric times.

In modern times, cairns are often erected as landmarks, a use they have had since ancient times. However, since prehistory, they have also been built and used as burial monuments; for defense and hunting; for ceremonial purposes, sometimes relating to astronomy [*think Stone Henge*]; to locate buried items, such as caches of food or objects; and to mark trails, among other purposes.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cairn>

We have not come far from the Stone Age – in spite of our high opinion of ourselves.

Now in these modern times – with the earth in peril – we need to take note of the effects we have when doing our rock-human ritualistic thing. I came across an article entitled, “Stone piling causes more harm than just visible blight.” I hadn’t understood this before:

The stacking of stones or building cairns ... has been a growing problem that appeared to gain popularity in the western states and moved east. In some places, people have made hundreds of piles. While a few of the carefully-balanced piles might be considered artistic, most are just stacks of stones. All of them represent a human intrusion on places where most people go to enjoy nature. The building of a cairn in a public place is more of a statement about the ego of the builder than it is about art...

...Rock piling violates the outdoor ethic, “Take only photographs and leave only footprints.” Stacking stones might not be quite as bad as spray-painting a boulder or carving your initials into a tree, but then again — ecologically — in a stream, it might be worse.

According to Brent McDaniel... from the Friends of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, stacking river rocks seriously damages the delicate river ecosystem in that park.

“And it’s not just cairns,” McDaniel said. “The same goes for moving rocks and creating dams to make chutes or pools in a stream. Salamanders like the Eastern hellbender, which can grow up to 2 feet in length, live in spaces and crevices under river rocks. These amazing creatures have been on this planet for 65 million years, but are now listed as near threatened in large part due to habitat loss.”

...If you are fascinated by piling one rock on top of another, do it in your backyard. That way, you can enjoy your “art” every day. That will not break any rules, cause any ecological damage, or bother those who appreciate nature.

<http://www.centredaily.com/sports/outdoors/article86051077.html>

It would behoove us as Christians, as humans, as rock creatures – to listen to those who listen to the earth – especially the rocks. You may remember our story from two

weeks ago about the street theatre parade Jesus arranged in Jerusalem. Hear one more time a message from the leader of our movement:

36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying,

‘Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!’

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ 40 He answered, **‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’**

Luke 19 NRSV

Who are we NOT to listen...

Scripture Reading for Sunday April 23, 2017 – Easter 2 – Year A

John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."** 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.