

A stack of rough stones (21A; Matthew 16:13-20)

Imagine Jesus at the beach, building a cairn.

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On the rocky beach below Portland Head Light in Fort Williams Park in Maine, visitors have built dozens of cairns. The spindly stacks of stones, balanced precariously on boulders, echo the height of the lighthouse beyond.

When my family visited the park, we tried to build a few cairns of our own to add to the collection. We quickly gave up. Balancing rocks on top of each other is harder than it looks: with no perfectly flat surfaces, we struggled to find the right balance points and lacked the patience to keep trying. The stones slid and toppled. All our stacks tumbled over.

I imagine Jesus on the shore in Galilee, picking up stones washed smooth in the lake and setting them one on top of the other, trying over and over again until he finds the right fit. I think of his deep attention to creation, his patience and dexterity, as he eases the rocks into place, one and then another and another.

At a more perilous moment in his story, just as he is squaring his shoulders for Jerusalem, Jesus asks the disciples a seemingly obvious question: "Who do you say that I am?" Do they get it? Can they see beyond the rumors in the crowds? Have the stones of his ministry begun to stack together in their minds, pointing them toward the anointed one?

It is Simon who dares to say it out loud. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus hoots in triumph. “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah,” he exclaims. The fisherman is a figurative child of the reluctant prophet: like Jonah, Simon gets the work done yet messes up every step of the way. Even so, of all people, Simon has been the one to put the pieces together. It is such a profound moment that it calls for a re-naming, a new reality from now on, like Abram to Abraham or Jacob to Israel.

“You’re Rocky!” Jesus says, giving Simon the nickname he’ll keep forever, “and on this rock I will build my church.”

Jesus was a carpenter, so he knew about building. In the Sermon on the Mount, he was clear that structures should be founded on solid rock, not loose sand. But Peter was no bedrock. He was more like the stones by the beach—a little too lumpy, a little too rough, to balance anything without the whole stack tumbling over.

Yet Jesus had no smoother stone to start his stack than Peter, and he has nothing to build with now except rough stones like you and me. Centuries have proven just how unwieldy the living stones of the church can be. We’re pointy in all the wrong places. We wobble and shake. We can barely hold on to one another. In any other hands, we would topple all together.

Thankfully, Jesus’ hands are practiced and patient. With grace, he finds our balance points. With skill, he raises us from our feeble flatness to new height we can reach only when in community with one another. And with power, he calls us to say aloud, with Peter, that he is the Saving One, a confession strong enough to hold us. The unseen mortar between the stones is the one called Christ.