



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, August 23, 2020**  
*The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Solemn Eucharist*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*  
*on*  
Matthew 16:13-20  
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### **Rocky Soil**

Jesus had a parable that he taught us, about a sower who scattered his seeds, widely, not just in the places you'd expect, places like the good tilled soil where it would multiply a hundred times over, but also in thorny places where jagged vines would entangle and choke the grain as it rose to the sky, or where flocks of birds lived that would pluck the seeds from the earth before they could begin their new life, and also, another place, among the rocks, where there was not much soil at all, a shallow place. The seed takes root, and grows, even quickly, but its roots have nowhere to go, and when the sun comes, light meant for their benefit, to guide them up to heaven, also shines upon the rocks, heating them up, having them reflect upon the grain, filling every shadow. They die not from malicious forces like birds or thorns, but, perhaps most bitterly, they die from the beneficent light of the sun. Without depth, and among the heated rocks, the energy is too much for them. They have everything they need from above, the sun, the rain, but because they are planted in rocky soil, they die over exposed, out of their depth, the rocks become their gravestones.

After hearing this parable, perhaps a hundred times if you were one of Jesus' disciples, after having this teaching in your bones, how would you react if Jesus called you "Rocky" or "The Rock"? This, after all, is the name bestowed upon Simon, son of Jonah, Jesus' star pupil. Jesus dubs him "Peter" after a masterful response Simon gives to a crucial question: "Who do you say that I am?" If Jesus were to call you "The Rock" would that inspire you, or make you think twice?

Now the less crucial question from Jesus came first. "Who am I to other people?" There is this collective answer from all of them. They know Jesus' reputation well. They name the prophets of old, Elijah and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, who took up the mantle of the prophets in their own day. This is who he now is, to so many. They told him that he is, even now, numbered among the people who spoke the truth of God to crowds and to kings and to would be kings, called by God to live out signs and wonders, also called by God for a life of struggle, and in their piercing vision, these prophets spoke their prophecy of the magnificent truth, of the fire to come.

When Jesus asks them "Who do you say that I am?" It is only Simon, son of Jonah, who speaks, quickly springing up from the group, like the grain from the rocks, with a burst of vivid insight, "You are the Christ!" And by saying this, Simon is also saying "Perhaps other people are right, but that is not enough. You are somehow both prophet and prophecy walking among us. You are both truth spoken and truth active and changing the world for the better. You are the long-foretold liberator promised by God through his prophets,

as if you've jumped right out of the scrolls we read in our services, the true King to free us and our sacred country from the thorny clutches of King Caesar."

Jesus really likes this response. In front of everyone, he honors this answer as bolt of insight right from heaven. He blesses Simon. He speaks of him as Peter, as the Rock, and this is, at first glance, a rugged and stable image, a prophetic image, in fact. Looking to a future community that can stand strong upon this "rock", upon this living stone of a person animated by such insight. Simon, now Peter (or ever more Peter, this could have been one of his monikers that Jesus is emphasizing), this Rock of a person will serve to found and ground a home for God's people for generations, and also, with his life poured out like Christ, to serve to fortify the spiritual walls that protect us against the powers of evil.

You should know that this entire exchange is happening in Caesarea of Phillipi, a place of spiritual infamy for the Jews, under the shadow of two great representations of evil for them, the gleaming white Temple to Augustus Caesar that Herod the Great built in his prime, and another more ancient temple complex with a dreadful cavern that was recognized as both the realm of the trickster god, Pan, and also a gateway to the underworld. And so, how moving in that place, in that rocky soil, to tell the disciples that "the gates of hell shall not prevail" against them.

There is such strength that Jesus is naming in Peter and his heritage. How discouraging that almost immediately after this blessing and this naming and this prophecy, Simon Peter works to undermine and corrode its promise. Jesus starts to talk with him and disciples about what it practically means to be the Christ, what Christ must do, where Christ must go, and to what lengths. His victory involves suffering. His liberation involves tribulation. He speaks of enduring, perishing, and rising. And as the light of the Son of the Living God increases in intensity, like seed sown among the rocks, Peter is scorched by the intense Light of the suffering love of Christ. His recently praised insight is exposed as shallow, as partial. Did he really know what he was saying when he said that Jesus was the Christ?

He spoke the truth, but as more is revealed, he recoils from the vision of truth, and even seeks to snuff out that light, trying to turn Jesus away from his mission. In response, Jesus' blessing for his friend segues into a crushing rebuke, especially for someone so close: "Get behind me, Satan."

He also, among other potent sayings, says something along the lines of this to Peter. "You balk at the Cross of Christ? Well, I say to you, take up *your* cross and follow me." Endure, Perish, and Be Raised with Me.

He knows Christ so vividly in Caesarea of Phillipi, but the very next moment, he doesn't know him at all. The Petrine promise, our inheritance as members of the Church, is a both blessing and a kind of curse. The keys he is given can both set people free from evil, and also lock them up. We see how Simon Peter can be both the clear-cut Rock that grounds and fortifies the Church, but can also be the Rock that gets in the way, a truly scorching obstacle to himself and even the growth of Christ's kingdom. The Rock that can float upon the waters with Jesus, and also seek to sink and drag us and him down like a millstone around the neck.

As members of the Church who are built upon such a Rock, we are being called by the Gospels to dwell on our community's foundation and to be spurred toward an extraordinary vigilance in faith. The Church is not only a place of rest and restoration, but also a place where a new kind of burden is revealed to us, the burden of faithfulness, the burden of the truth not just at the surface.

Jesus once talked about our spiritual task involving a kind of powerful but delicate plow which tills the earth that once you set your hands to it, use it to do your work, you don't want to turn aside, or you will bend or break the plow and lose your livelihood. In Peter, we witness one who does indeed turn sharply with his hand to the plow, risking it all, quite a few times. He nearly drowns while trying to follow Christ upon the water. He renounces Christ while his teacher suffers in prison. He like so many other friends cower from the Cross, giving no comfort, not there to hear his last loving breath. Such rocky soil.

In Peter, we are called to reckon with how our virtues, our insights, our pledges, our primary relationships, even our friendship with and devotion to Christ himself promise to be abundant sources of strength, but these promises can pivot in a flash into occasions for greater folly, anguish, even betrayal, bending that plow beyond recognition.

But just as Peter can pivot away, wonderfully, so too can he pivot back, with just as much drama. He's caught by Christ before he drowns on the sea of Galilee. Peter is sharply rebuked by Jesus as "Satan", yes, but this snaps him out of his confusion, and despite his profound mistake, Peter does join Jesus on the ultimate road to Jerusalem. And, even though Peter tragically lets Jesus down in the city that kills the prophets in his hour of greatest need, Christ bursts through the gates of hell and death to call him back, meeting him in his desolation on the shores of the sea at the Resurrection, calling him, trusting him, even after all that, to feed his sheep, to be the Rock for our Church in the Name of Christ.

Christ's mercy is far deeper than Peter's shallow roots. And Christ's mercy is far deeper than our shallow roots, as well. Both Peter and we would be lost without it. His dual rockiness, like ours, is ultimately grounded on the bedrock of the mercy and grace of God, prepared from the foundation of the world, a living rock which ever shifts to support us when we are in the right, and to pull us up when we've gone horribly wrong, stronger than our weakness, overwhelming our suspicion and fear with trust and love. Our rocky heritage is not ultimately founded on Peter, it is mediated by him, transmitted by him, handed on to all those who follow in his steps.

But his true steps are firstly Christ's. We have hope through Peter, because he had hope in Christ. We have hope in the Church built upon him, thanks to the enduring mercy that Christ has for him and us. Through that hope and mercy, even we as seeds that have been cast upon the rocks have a chance to be replanted in good soil, in the good earth that is waiting for us to grow ever deeper and ever higher under the rays of God's enduring, perishing, and risen love.