

STONES for EASTER (and ANZAC)

Stonehenge is a prehistoric monument not far from Salisbury Cathedral. It consists of huge standing stones and was built c. 2500BC about 150 years after the pyramids in Egypt. Both Stonehenge and the Pyramids are connected with burials. ANZAC too is remembered across our nation with engraved stones. Central to the Christian story of Easter is the movement of a large stone from the mouth of a tomb. It should not have moved. It was intended to testify that here was the body of Jesus of Nazareth, a failed rebel. But the women disciples of Jesus go to the tomb and find that the stone has moved and the tomb is empty. They tell the men, and it is recorded that 'the disciples returned to their own homes'. In other words, they do nothing.

This stone demands a witness to tell the story. It is a woman who is weeping. Faithful to the memory of Jesus, she will not run away. She meets him astonished. I've always loved the phrase from the KJV, 'she, supposing him to be the gardener'. I'm reminded that God has been gardening forever – growing new life into creation. And she believes. Believes what? That Jesus has risen from the dead. The stone of death, that tells us we have only a dark future without existence, is moved so that the light of life can flood in. I cherish Leonard Cohen's line in one of his songs - 'there is a crack in everything; that is how the light gets in.'

Mary Magdalene became a witness of what she had experienced, 'I have seen the Lord.' she said. Our faith in this fact changes our view of the universe. Once we have seen the reality of the risen Jesus, nothing else can be understood in the same way as before. Mary of Magdala was there at the beginning of a movement that was going to transform humanity. St Augustine called her the 'apostle to the apostles'.

The early church believed, and they had good reason to, that a martyr was one who witnessed. The Coptic Christians murdered in Libya last month died proclaiming that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. They are martyrs in both senses of the word – they witnessed and they died for their faith. On Maundy Thursday, when we met for our hand washing service in Elliston, 150 Kenyans were killed because of being Christian. In Australia we Christians get tired: in other places Christians are tortured. We are commanded in the story of the Good Samaritan to support persecuted communities with love, goodness and generosity.

Yet these martyrs are actually caught up in resurrection life: their cruel deaths and the brutality of their persecution is overcome by Christ himself. Ultimately evil will be defeated. Otherwise, what's the point?

We are left to answer some other questions. 'In our comfort, in our churches, in our organized lifestyles are we *still* witnesses?' Easter is not over. The shops may have moved on to the centenary of ANZAC and Mothers Day, but for us it is still Easter until the feast of Pentecost arrives with its celebration of God's Spirit within us and within our way of living.

St Peter called us living stones (1Peter 2: 5) and he writes in his letter to Christians c. 80AD, 'Welcome to the living stone... God set it in a place of honour. Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ approved lives up to God... You are the living stones, the ones chosen by God to be holy, to be God's instruments to do his work and to speak out for him; to tell others of the night and day difference he made for you. Friends, Peter says, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves too cosy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life within your community.' The Message

The church is a gathering of living stones. 'Wait a tic...' we say, 'Do stones have life?' Consciousness - no - as far as we know; but life – yes. They are made of a variety of minerals that can respond to seismic activities. They will move in an earthquake. And rocks crack. We, however, are not called to move under pressure and crack in the process but rather to stay strong in Christ.

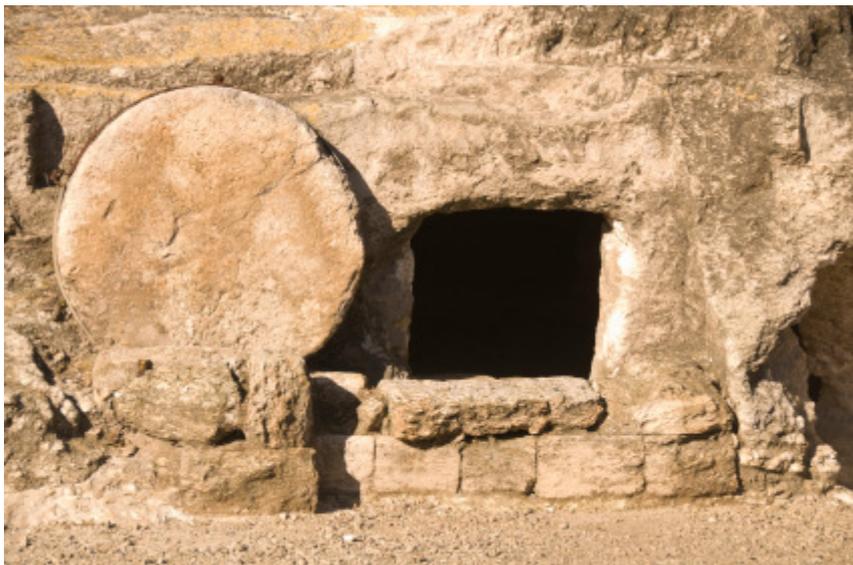
As living stones we are witnesses to the love and goodness of Jesus. Every action we take, every inaction, every agreement, every disagreement, everything we do and say, or refrain from doing and saying, paradoxically, speaks louder than any words.

The stone at the tomb was a silent witness. But we are living stones - speaking witnesses. Let us be clear, gentle, loving, peaceful witnesses who, in a dark world, sing our song of hope.

'The kingdom of God is creation healed.'

'The Lord is risen. Jesus is alive – all creation is transformed.'

May God help us to deeply believe and be unafraid to continue to be witnesses. AMEN



Acknowledgement of Archbishop Marcus Welby's Easter Sermon
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