

Straight from the "Hart"

March 19, 2023 Laetare Sunday



Sharing the journey
to know, love, and serve

Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are glad you are participating in today's time of worship by reading this service script. Our Lenten Series is called "Journey of Stones" and is very loosely based on a book by the same title, written by Steven Molin.

This is **Laetare Sunday** ... Laetare comes from a traditional Latin service in which the opening words are a command from Isaiah: Rejoice! "Rejoice Jerusalem, and come together all you who love her. Rejoice with joy, you who have been in sorrow." (for them it was from being in exile and looking forward to coming home). On a much smaller scale, we who are observing Lenten disciplines, are encouraged to pause to anticipate the celebration -- for we have reached the half way point of the season and the day is soon coming when we will pass through the cross and experience the joy of resurrection.

Money In honor of Laetare Sunday, today's money verse comes from Romans where Paul tells us that "God's kingdom is about what God does with your life [by giving] redeeming justice, true peace, and joy [that is] made possible by the Holy Spirit. When you single-mindedly serve Christ in this way you will please God and are valued by others. So let's agree not to drag others down by finding fault but to use all our energy to pursue a life that creates peace and builds up one another through encouraging words." Romans 20:17-21 (MSG, VOICE, GNT) So let's give in joy for the purpose of encouraging each other as we move together into our future.

Opening Prayer

Gracious Father, accept our gifts of resources, time, talents, and witness, as we answer your call to be a blessing to others. For you have been good to us, and we have gathered because we want to express our gratitude, to celebrate your salvation, and to call on your name. You live with and within us, and we invite you again to feed our spirits as we worship you. In Jesus name, Amen. Please remain standing for the Call to Worship and first song.

Call to Worship

Come, rejoice, all who are drawn to follow God, whose days are spent in doing good -- and nights spent in praise and prayer. Come, be refreshed from the

weariness of life to know and serve God. Find happy hours to join the heavenly powers in the new, everlasting song.

(Inspired by Charles Wesley's "How Happy, Gracious Lord, Are We")

Music Last week, Jesus encouraged us by saying we would withstand any storm if we built our lives on his teachings. So let's remind ourselves of the foundation we are building our lives on by singing

My Hope is Built

Words: Edward Mote, 1834 Music: William B. Bradbury, 1863

1. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain:

On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

3. His oath, his covenant, his blood supports me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

(Refrain)

On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

4. When he shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found!
Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne!

(Refrain)

On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

Intro to and Bible Reading 1

There is no question that our faith teaches us to put our hope in Christ but one question we must ask ourselves is, "*Why* are we putting our hope in him? And for what does Jesus want us to put our hope in him?"

Jesus had taught people all day. They are hungry. He miraculously feeds them all. They wanted to force him to be their king, so he slipped away into the hills. That night the disciples take the one boat on shore and leave. Jesus catches up with them on the water. The remaining crowd knew only that his disciples had left for Capernaum without Jesus.

When the people realized Jesus was gone and not coming back, they got into boats that had arrived that morning. They went to Capernaum, expecting that Jesus would eventually meet up with his disciples there. When they arrived, they

were shocked to see that Jesus had already arrived. Now we pick up the story....
(summary of John 6:1-24)

When they found Jesus [already] back on the other side of the lake, they said, “Teacher, when did you arrive at Capernaum?”

Jesus answered, “I am telling you the truth: you are tracking me down not because you understood my miracles as signs of God in my actions, but because I fed you and filled your stomachs and you had all you wanted. Don’t waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Instead, you should seek and work for food that nourishes your eternal life, for food that the Son of Man provides, because God the Father has placed his seal of approval on him, guaranteeing that he, and what he does, will last.

So the crowd asked him, “What do we have to do to accomplish the works that God wants us to do?”

Jesus answered, “If you want to do God’s work, commit yourself to believe in the one God has sent...My Father is right now offering you the Bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the Bread of Life. Those who believe in me and align themselves with me will never be hungry or thirsty.” John 6:25-29 (from 32-35) (MSG, VOICE, GNT)

Theme

Today, the stone we hold is a labeling stone. When used correctly, labels help us put things in categories to increase understanding. Every time I send or receive something in the mail, I use a label, and because of that label, that letter gets where it is supposed to go. Unfortunately, more often than not, our culture uses labels not to increase understanding, but to skip understanding, or not think about it at all.

In what we just heard. A feeding miracle led people not to learn more about truth and heaven, but to try and create a king who was an expert in economic supply. (“I can get what I want from him, so I am going to make him king.” When they chased him down, they ask how to get what they want from him – I’m not sure they were listening for a real answer. If they are like most people, it would be like the child who asks, “What do I have to do to get a ride to the ice cream store?” The child isn’t really asking what they have to do – they are just informing the parent, “I want ice cream.” But it sounds better if you put it in a question form and offer to do something and you are more likely to get a “yes” response that way. That might be what they were trying to do with Jesus. “How do I get this bread you gave us that we want to keep on getting.”

With convenience labels, we don't have to think – we just jump to the easy questions or easy answers – we hear the label and leap to what we think we are supposed to think.

In a fifth-grade classroom, the teacher was trying to teach "estimating". She held up a big jar of ping pong balls, "How many ping pong balls would you estimate are in this jar?"

One boy said 40. One girl said 25. The teacher asked how they arrived at their answers. The little girl said, "It looked like there were five balls on the bottom row, and there were five rows, so 5×5 was 25, so that is how I made my guess. The boy said, "Yesterday was my dad's 40th birthday. That sounded like a good number, so I guessed 40." The balls were removed, and they counted -- 40 balls. The boy cheered when he got the prize. Unfortunately, it was the one who took a guess out of the blue that was right... It happens once in a while, enough to encourage us to stop thinking about the questions and just take our wild guesses about what things are supposed to mean.

I think I told you about the pastor who was giving a children's sermon. He asked them "What's small and gray and furry and climbs trees?" And Billy answered, "Well, it sounds like a squirrel, but I think the answer is supposed to be Jesus." At least he was learning early that the answer is supposed to be Jesus. But we have to listen to the questions first to get the right answers.

But sometimes we learn the wrong answers based on bad assumptions or appearances. A few months ago, Terri showed you a video of a pastor who dressed up like a homeless person (unrecognizable) in front of his church to see what kind of response he was going to get from his church as a homeless person, and they showed him much grace. I saw a post recently of a person who apparently wasn't really nicely dressed (I know this because it came up in one of the conversations) who was carrying a cardboard sign saying something like support veterans... He was on the public sidewalk in front of the church. This church, I think began with the title "Christ Cares", and then some other things. And, at least the way this clip was edited, it showed at least several people who made assumptions about the man, and tried to get him to move along, sometimes nicely, sometimes with language you don't usually hear in church parking lots... and they even called the police to try and force him along – of course, he was on a public sidewalk, so the police didn't do anything.

When Jesus was on this earth, he told us to draw different assumptions when we

see people – in essence, he told us to not see their poverty, their hunger, their thirst – except to help in those situations -- but primarily, he wanted them to see him in them, so that when you do it for them, you do it for him (See Matthew 25:31-46). In fact, Jesus says if you fail the people in need, we fail Jesus, and he becomes a stumbling block to us. But if we do do what we could to help, then we become a built and growing into God's people and Jesus becomes the Cornerstone of our growth in faith and life – it teaches us how to develop character traits that treat others differently.

Responsive Lenten Confession

L: Come to the Lord, the Living Stone.

P: He was rejected as worthless by people -- but chosen and honored by God as the valuable Cornerstone.

L: Come as living stones. Let yourselves be assembled into the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life. Offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

P: Now for we who trust him, we can be proud of this precious Stone.

L: But to those who do not believe, he becomes a stumbling stone over which they trip, a boulder blocking their way.

P: They stumble because they do not follow God's will for them as they were destined to do.

L: But you are a chosen people for the high calling of being God's instruments to do his work and proclaim his wonderful acts. He made a night-and-day difference in you.

P: By his mercy, he called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

L: You have been reborn as children of an Eternal Father through the living and enduring Word of God. Therefore, since you have a taste of God, like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk. Deeply drink in God's pure goodness, that you may grow mature and whole in his salvation.

P: We will rid ourselves of all malice, pretense and deceit, hypocrisy and insincerity, jealousy and envy, slander and hurtful talk.

Inspired by 1 Peter 1:23-2:10

Music: [ending with]. David did not lose hope in the merciful acts that make it possible for us to rid ourselves of self-destructive qualities and grow into his

salvation when he wrote: when he wrote...I waited and waited patiently for the Lord's help. Then he listened to my cry. He reached down and lifted me out of the deep, dark, muddy pit where I was stranded, mired in the muck and clay. With a gentle hand he pulled me out and set me safely on a solid rock, and held me until I was secure enough to continue the journey again.
Psalm 40:1-2 (MSG, VOICE, GNT)



He Brought Me Out

Words: Henry J. Zelle 1898 (Refrain): H. L. Gilmour 1898 Music: HL Gilmour, 1898

1. My heart was distressed 'neath Jehovah's dread frown,
And low in the pit where my sins dragged me down.
I cried to the Lord from the deep, miry clay,
who tenderly brought me out to golden day.

Refrain

He brought me out of the miry clay; he set my feet on the Rock to stay;
he puts a song in my soul today, a song of praise, hallelujah!

2. He placed me upon the strong Rock by his side,
My steps were established and here I'll abide.
No danger of falling while here I remain,
but stand by his grace until the crown I gain.

Refrain

4. I'll sing of his wonderful mercy to me;
I'll praise him till all men his goodness shall see;
I'll sing of salvation at home and abroad,
till many shall hear the truth and trust in God.

Refrain

God Moments These congregation testimonies were not scripted.

Music Pstr: Let's prepare our hearts by singing

Praise the Name of Jesus

Words & Music: Roy Hicks, Jr. © 1976 Latter Rain Music

Praise the name of Jesus. Praise the name of Jesus.

He's my rock, he's my Fortress, he's my deliverer, in him will I trust.

Praise the name of Jesus

(Repeat)

Pastor's Prayer Almighty God, you are our hiding place in the cleft of the rock – to whom we retreat, our protection in times of trouble. We praise you during this Lenten season, for we realize you emptied yourself, you dashed your doubts, faced your fears, and were broken for us that we may find hope, peace, freedom and life as we trust in you. Inspired by that confidence, we faithfully pray to you while you are present, and you bless us with forgiveness and surround us with deliverance. You lovingly watch and teach us in the way we should go. Help us not to be stubbornly unwisely and try to go our own way. We rejoice when we come to you, for even in the midst of overwhelming distress and sorrow, we are surrounded by your unflinching love. You are full of compassion, graciousness and are fair, You are good to us. You save us, rescue us, comfort us, renew and refresh us -- you keep us moving forward even as you give rest for our souls. You have freed us to serve you just as your servants who went before us. Therefore, we thank you and call on your name, here and everywhere we go, and we lift our requests and praises before you. **Praises and Petitions** Today, we pray for comfort for the family and friends of Gar and Vivian Lemon's aunt Eva Freel. She was 99 years old and died 2 weeks ago. We also pray for Linda Oldford recovering from knee surgery this week. We also pray for what we heard in the testimonies of successful cancer treatments, and we pray for Jeanette Fuller's sister Debbie Ellis who has cancer - - and for all those unnamed among us-- and beyond us -- who are recovering from illness or injury or facing tests or loss or other types of challenges or setbacks in their lives, for these and others on our hearts and minds, we lift our prayers in this moment of silence . [Brief Pause] Now as you children, teach us to live as your Son taught us to pray... **LORD's PRAYER**

Intro to and Bible Reading 2

We have heard that we need to build our lives on Jesus. Jesus cares about our temporary material essentials such as perishable foods (See Matthew 6:24ff) but we do not build our lives on him for this, but for the life-changing spiritual nourishment that will last in heaven and in others. It isn't an easy lesson to learn.

The religious leaders were harassing Jesus again. They were trying to catch him in a verbal trap. Jesus left them. He and his disciples got in a boat and went across the sea. Apparently, this last argument was still heavy on his mind, for Jesus warned his followers to keep a sharp eye



out for the yeast of the religious leaders. Unfortunately, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread for the journey. They thought Jesus was scolding them for that. Jesus overheard their whispered concerns. He reminded them of how easy it is for him to take care of that situation. He wasn't talking about physical bread, he was talking about the dangerous teachings of the religious leaders because just a little bit of it can ruin a person just as a little bit of yeast can work through the dough and ruin a perfectly good loaf of unleavened bread. (See 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, Galatians 5:7ff) They arrive outside the villages they are going to visit. (summary of Matthew 16:1- 13a) Jesus turns to his disciples to see if they were beginning to understand his "breadiness" versus the yeast of the religious leaders.

(L - Lay Reader **P – Pastor**) .

L: Jesus asked his disciples, "What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?"

P: "Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets."

L: "What about you? Who do you say that I am?"

P: Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

L: God bless you, Simon. For you didn't learn this truth from any books or human teachers. You learned this secret of who I really am from my Father in heaven, from God himself. And now I am going to tell you who you really are. This is why I have called you Peter, a rock. On this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will be able to overcome it and keep it out of its gates. Peter, I give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven – complete and free access to God's kingdom – no more barriers between heaven and earth. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Matthew 16:13b-19 (MSG, VOICE, GNT)

Music Peter is given a great gift of understanding and names Jesus for who he is and we are all blessed because of it. Let's stand if comfortable before the sermon and sing

There's Within My Heart a Melody

Words: Luther B. Bridgers, 1910 Music: Luther B. Bridgers, 1910

1. There's within my heart a melody Jesus whispers sweet and low:
Fear not, I am with thee, peace, be still, in all of life's ebb and flow.

Refrain

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know,
fills my every longing, keeps me singing as I go.

2. All my life was wrecked by sin and strife, discord filled my heart with pain;
Jesus swept across the broken strings, stirred the slumbering chords again.

Refrain

3. Though sometimes he leads through waters deep, trials fall across the way,
though sometimes the path seems rough and steep,
see his footprints all the way.

Refrain

4. Feasting on the riches of his grace, resting neath his sheltering wing,
always looking on his smiling face, that is why I shout and sing.

Refrain

Sermon: Labeling Stone: Naming Power

A pastor reflected on his youth, saying he was enthralled with superheroes like Superman, Batman, the Lone Ranger, the Phantom. They would suddenly appear and save the day when people needed help. But what impressed him most was their desire to remain behind the scenes. They left people amazed at what they had accomplished, the feats that they had done, but also left them wondering -- "Who was that?"

Jesus left people wondering who he was. Most knew he was the son of Joseph the construction worker. But once Jesus began performing miracles and teaching like no-one had ever heard before, many and varied opinions surfaced as to his *real* identity, and how we answer, "Who is that?" can make all the difference.

The disciples had been living and traveling together with Jesus for over two years at this point. They observed his character, watched his miracles listened to his teachings, and from time to time, even they asked, "Who is this, that he can do...[whatever he had just done]." And now Jesus wants to see what answers they have figured out. He starts with a general question to get our thoughts flowing: "Who do people say that I am?"

Many of us, if asked that kind of a question, may say what parents believe, or mumble what we think the church teaches, or report what popular culture thinks we believe, or what the culture thinks we think we are supposed to believe. That is not an inaccurate way to answer the first question of Jesus, "What does everyone

else think? So that is fine. The disciples answered in a kind and diplomatic way. They mention prophets (John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Elijah, others) recognized at this point as popular and faithful – but they didn't mention that some thought he was a revolutionary, a charlatan, a rebel, a blasphemer. Those are the kind of things most people only mention "in the parking lot", not to a person's face.

It is the next question that really matters. It is where the rubber meets the road, how the answer may transform our life: "But who do you say that I am, What do you think of me?" And with the labeling stone in hand, many in our culture would probably choose one of the options I just mentioned above without really investigating or thinking through the question ("I heard this" or "I heard that, and that is my answer too." – We go to the most recent headline of our favorite information source and spit that back out. It would have been easy for the disciples to answer with simple, basic, external observations about his life. After all, this type of labeling is very popular and very powerful. Why do we give people nicknames? Especially the insulting kind? Because it has power to put people down, or build people up if that is (hopefully) what we are trying to do. Simple answer with a simple phrase, and it seems like it ends all the discussion before we even know what that phrase means.

Many years ago in Europe, a church organist was practicing. An unkempt man walked in. Maybe it was because he was traveling, maybe it was just a bad day, maybe it was bad weather outside, maybe he was being casual that day – I don't know what the issue was, or if there even was one. He asked if he could play the organ. The organist saw his rough appearance [slapped on a label with all of its negative characteristics] and was immediately concerned for the precious, expensive equipment that he might be touching. She told him, "No." The stranger persisted. The organist finally relented and quickly became spellbound as the visitor's fingers danced over the keyboard. When the stranger finished and got up to leave. The organist burst out, "Who are you, what is your name?" As the traveler exited the building, he called over his shoulder "Felix Mendelsohn." The organist gasped to himself, "I almost did not let the master play."

Steven Molin writes that among other things, other labels, Jesus is "Creator" of everything. That means that he is creator of our enemies as well as our friends. He is the creator of people of different religions, people of different races, people of different -- fill in the blank. He is the creator of the people you love ... and the people with whom we are not so comfortable. That should warn us about the

dangers of labeling by appearance, by shallow, surfacey observations, or by “nicknames”.

Jesus doesn't want us to make snap judgments and casual observations when he asks us, “Who do you think I am?” He wants to see if we really understand *who* he is to each of us. Peter knew Jesus was more than a typical traveler, a man with dirty hair, wrinkled face, dusty feet and soiled clothes – that is what you get when you walk around in the desert. Peter saw past a proficient traveling rabbi, saw past the prophetic man in the line of the great prophets. He saw through to the divine. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus is delighted at Peter's response because it was not a human deduction, but it was revealed to Peter by God, and if Peter could grasp God's revelation, then the world was going to be in good hands. If we can figure out who God is and what he wants, then, then we too are in good hands too.

We could list a lot of labels of Jesus – Savior, Lord, teacher, prophet, redeemer, philosopher, Creator, to name just a few of the positive ones... But the real answer, the honest answer, is not about what others say, it is not even about repeating what Peter said, (“Since it was such a great answer, let's just go with that one.”) It is not about that either, it is not about quoting the “right” answer. The question is, has the right answer penetrated our hearts and changed who we are? Does it impact what we believe, and how we speak, and how we act -- daily?

Once the Holy Spirit reveals and guides us to true faith in the nature of Christ and his work, then Jesus excitedly talks about how that builds our lives. First, he says, “I will build my church on this rock.”

Now I want you to know that this conversation is taking place in Caesarea Philippi. Here are a couple pictures of that area. The first is of a cave out of which flowed a natural spring. There was a lot of water in the area, making it possible for much growth in a region that was mostly desert. So it was a cherished area for farming and also for worship of various gods. A number of temples were built there. The second picture shows the remains of one of them. It could well be somewhere near these rocky cliffs – you can't see it well, but there are people in that picture, just tiny – those are huge rocky cliff faces. And it is in that setting that Jesus is asking the questions and is now saying, :upon this rock I will



build my church.” It is very visual for them! Now he wasn’t talking about the actual area, but what rock is he talking about? There is a lot of debate about that. Is the rock Christ himself, is the rock Peter, or is the rock the confession that Peter made about Christ?

My opinion in a nutshell: In the original language, I’m told the name Peter means “a stone” or “a [loose] rock”, while the rock on which the church is built is a different word which means rock as in a rocky ledge, or cliff (like they were looking at that day). Elsewhere in the Bible, the figurative use of the word rock (when it is used as a metaphor for something else) is always used of God. When we look at the statements about the foundation of the faith, it usually refers to Christ’s teachings, and he said he taught only what the Heavenly Father revealed to Him, and that the Spirit would come and guide us in this truth. So put it together -- The church is built on the divine, but it is only as it is obedient to the teachings of the divine that it is built.

Just as Peter was a fisher of fish for many years and then became a fisher of men; Jesus was probably an apprentice builder, then builder for 30 years, and then became what we all know he became and was all along, and now he continues to build us as an expert builder. Just as a house is always in need of routine maintenance and tweaking, and sometimes major overhauls, he will never stop constructing our lives, always progressing, improving, maturing, and caring for our spiritual growth.

As we heard in the responsive reading, we are living stones, being built into the kingdom of God, constructed to be acceptable to him. What stones, what in our life, gets in the way of that progress? Can we live in obedience to his guidance so that we can continue being built up? Or are we constructing our own life after our own blueprints -- have we set our designs on something else?

There is a painting by the famous artist Menzel. It was supposed to be of King Frederick of Germany talking to his generals. Menzel painstakingly painted the those generals, who were forming a half circle in the center around where the king was going to be painted, and there is an army and others in the background Some were done and some were not because Menzel died before he could finish. So at best, the king looks kind of like a white ghost in the middle of these generals who are surrounding him. Lots of generals but no king.

Do we build our spiritual life on all the peripheries that seem to be so important and lose sight of the king that needs to be central? “Generals”, like desires, and

power, and popularity, and security, etc, and leave the King of kings until last, leaving him missing from the center of our lives?

To mix metaphors, the painting of our lives will never be complete without Christ at the center. But with him at the center, our spiritual lives can progress. How do we know if Jesus is central to our life?

One day a fox observed a dog chasing a rabbit through the forest and brush. Every day the dog would find and chase this rabbit, and every day the rabbit was too quick. The fox finally asked the dog, "How is it that a big powerful, swift dog like you can't catch that small, timid rabbit?" The dog replied, "I am running for a snack. He's running for his life!"

To put it in the context of the first reading – Jesus accuses the crowd that we are chasing him only to get our physical and emotional cravings satisfied, but we should be running with all we've got for the eternal life that Jesus Christ has offered us.

The promise Christ gives to those who do commit their lives into His hands: "The gates of hell, the gates of DEATH, the last and most powerful enemy -- cannot hold back God's love from reaching his people!" Our trust in him will ultimately bring victory in our lives...

Trust. There is a classic insurance advertisement where the big human executive tells the little 4-inch lizard standing before him. They were trying to figure out how to sell their product to their customers – how they could convince them that they can trust this insurance company. They decided they could do it by playing out the trust exercise game on the commercial. (You know, how you stand with your back to someone and fall backwards and they are supposed to catch you). So the big executive stands and positions himself with his back to the little lizard. who says, "Sir, I don't think..." but the executive begins to fall back and the commercial closes with the lizard saying "Oh dear..."

There are a lot of generals, a lot of things that we have given high rank in our life that we think will hold us up. But when crunch time comes and if we had to lay our whole weight on it, we would crush those props. But putting our hands in the life of Christ is better illustrated by the old family camp game. I've never played this one, but it is a camp game. One team is blindfolded. Then the other team then spreads itself across the field with their arms outstretched as obstacles. The blindfolded team then has to get across the field without touching the opposition. Their only hope is to rely on the voice of their team captain who is not blindfolded but is

shouting directions to them. It takes courage to follow the directions of our leader, to courageously walk by faith and not always by sight because we don't know what is going to happen tomorrow -- and to trust that his directions, his ethics, his convictions will guide us through anything that we come across. But to those who do, Jesus says two things will happen.

Keys are granted. Things are unlocked and opened. In Jesus day, the scribes were, by position, the ones that had the keys to scripture -- they were the ones who could interpret, reveal, and bring understanding to God's word. We recently heard in this series Jesus get upset because their lives and teachings did not unlock the doors to heaven and God for anyone, and they didn't even enter themselves. In fact, the legalistic burdens they put on everyone were so bad it was like they doubled down on locking the doors and then destroyed the keys.

But when God's people are at their best -- by their attitudes, and words, and actions, they reveal God's truth and enable us to open the heavenly kingdom to the people of earth. We are responsible for the kind of look they are going to get at God and heaven. This is why Jesus immediately talks about binding and loosing, about what is restricted and released... There is a responsible authority that is connected with having keys.

In New Testament times, a servant was given the keys to his master's storehouse. In doing so the master of the house has given the authority to his servant over all of those stored goods. But that does not give a person authority to change the rules of the game, or the rules of the owner. Some translations may make it sound that way. Whatever we do here, then God's got to make it okay up there too. That is not what it is intended to say. No, we are to reveal the grace of the kingdom that releases people from the enslaving power of sin. Some translations render it (and the Lord's Prayer supports the interpretation this way): that what you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, what you release on earth is already released in heaven. In other words, we are matching what is already going on up there, and because they see us doing it, they know what heaven is like. Heaven is not following our authority, we are following its authority. We may have the keys, but we do not own what lays behind the barn door -- the kingdom gates. The prayer says, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is [already done] in heaven."

The Spirit has gifted us with the revelation of who Christ is, making us people who are destined for ultimate victory both now and forever. As people who are learning

to trust Christ and his values in *all* things; we have been given power and responsibility and authority to speak and live the values of the kingdom in this world. As we do the will of heaven on the earth, what is bound there is bound here, and what is released there is released here. People should be able look at us and discover the truth – that loving grace of God reaching to all people, and nothing can hold back his loving compassion, and the spiritual nourishment that he gives that leads to eternal life.

Meditation – Procession of Stones

So now, with the labeling stone in hand, bow your heads and ponder the questions I'll read now but they are printed for your later extended meditation:

- 1) How are people labeling Jesus today? What do you hear in the news, websites, the entertainment media, friends or associates? Negative, neutral, or positive?
- 2) How would I label Jesus? Is my faith built on him or on “general” peripheries? Do I allow Jesus to change who I am – to be an example that unlocks heaven for others?
- 3) If Jesus were to “rename” me on the basis of what he sees that I can become, what might that name be? He renamed Peter, what might he rename you?
- 4) What labels in our world, what stumbling blocks in our world get in the way of me allowing Jesus to build my life toward that “new name”, that new potential that he has laid out before us?

As always, if nothing specific comes to mind in these next moments as a result of these questions or anything we have talked about today, let the stone represent anything else that is weighing you or another you are concerned about – and when it is time, if you find it difficult to walk, feel free to give your stone to someone else to carry your burden for you up to this cross – we are called to carry each other's burdens.

Music The instruments will play through our meditation song once, as it begins to start over again, we will stand as quietly as possible, and sing the first verse while we bring our stone to leave at the foot of the cross in front of me -- as a symbol that we are removing any periphery labels from the center of our life, that we are labeling Christ as our master and King, and that we want to be like him and represent his heavenly values to our world – or whatever else God has laid on your

heart today -- then and return to our seats, remain standing and continue singing to the end of the song...



Living for Jesus

Words: T.O. Chisolm, 1866 Music: C. Harold Lowden, 1883

1. Living for Jesus, a life that is true,
striving to please him in all that I do,
yielding allegiance, glad-hearted and free,
this is the pathway of blessing for me.

Refrain

O Jesus, Lord and Savior, I give myself to thee;
for thou, in thy atonement, didst give thyself for me;
I own no other Master, my heart shall be thy throne;
my life I give, henceforth to live, O Christ, for thee alone.

2. Living for Jesus who died in my place,
bearing on Calvary my sin and disgrace,
such love constrains me to answer his call,
follow his leading and give him my all.

Refrain

4. Living for Jesus through earth's little while,
my dearest treasure, the light of his smile,
seeking the lost ones he died to redeem,
bringing the weary to find rest in him.

Refrain

Blessing Now leave this place with triumphant keys that reveals all God's truth, illuminating darkness, reviving us from death, healing and nurturing our wounds, allow His flame of divine love to burn up the thorns of our sin, and kindling our heart with the warmth of His love. Amen.