



**“ROCKS AND HARD PLACES”**  
**SCRIPTURE: LUKE 24: 13-35**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, April 23, 2023**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Luke 24:13-35**

24:13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

24:14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

24:15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

24:16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

24:17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

24:18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

24:19 He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

24:20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

24:21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

24:22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,

24:23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

24:24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

24:25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

24:26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

24:27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

24:28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

24:29 But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

24:30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

24:31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

24:32 They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

24:33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

24:34 They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

24:35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

---

A Rock (hold up a rock and put it on the Communion Table)

**Image of rock on the screen for live stream–split screen, and on screen in the sanctuary**

And a hard place (hold up church and put it on the Communion Table)

**Image of church on the screen for live stream–with rock on ½ of screen and church image on ½ of screen. Both rock and church images displayed on screen in the sanctuary.**

Yes, church is a hard place. Especially when we lose track of the rock. The further we get from the rock, the harder of a place the church becomes.

**Take images down from the livestream.**

**Sanctuary image can go back to the thumbnail.**

Rocks are solid, foundational, grounding. Rocks are the core, they are the floor. And in this faith tradition, the rock is the door.

For Jesus followers, the rock is that stone rolled away from the tomb–the rock is the elephant in the room–the savior who didn't do the saving the way his followers thought he should. The incarnation of Divine Love who did everything he could...

He did everything he could to show us the way. And just think how hard it was to believe in much of anything back in the day, way back then on that road to Emmaus.

The day the tomb came up empty and Mary Magdalene said "I have seen the Lord." That very same day her pronouncement was called an "idle tale." That same day–these two disciples were walking back home–leaving Jerusalem after the Passover Feast–what was supposed to be a celebration, a festival of ancestral liberation.

But that year, it turned bloody–it turned violent and vile. That year the meal was the beginning of the end for Jesus' friends. And the end was just the beginning for the likes of us.

So, picture it if you can–Cleopus walking the 7 miles back home after those days of terror, of grief... those 7 miles were defined by disorientation, discombobulation, and disbelief!

Some say Cleopus' companion on that road was his wife. So, add to the list the potential dynamics of some marital strife!

Talk about a rock and a hard place!

The specific phrase can be traced back to 1917 to a labor dispute in Bisbee, Arizona.

### **Put up miners image**

When copper miners went on strike to protest unsafe working conditions and the mining company refused to change. So, the miners were caught between a rock and a hard place. This phrase found its footing in the US during the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup>

### **Take down miners image**

It's about being caught between two bad options with nowhere else to turn.

So back to that Emmaus Rd. Cleopus and maybe his wife were talking it out... they were confused, they were exhausted, they were taking a different route

No need to stay in Jerusalem—it was time to go back home, to return to the life they had hoped would be rearranged.

To count not so much their blessings but the ways they had been short-changed.

Luke tells the story in this provocative way. These two are trying to make sense of what happened that day and how Jesus had not been who they thought he would be. They were talking about hopes dashed, they were talking about grief. They didn't know who or what to believe.

And then Jesus sidles up and says "What's the buzz!" And Cleopus and maybe his wife ask this stranger—who in the world he was—have you been living under a rock! Are you the only person who hasn't heard what's been going on in Jerusalem?

---

<sup>1</sup> "The US Bankers' Panic of 1907... was especially damaging to the mining and railroad industries of the western states... In 1917 the lack of funding precipitated by the earlier banking crisis led to a dispute between copper mining companies and mineworkers in Bisbee, Arizona. The workers, some of whom had organized in labor unions, approached the company management with a list of demands for better pay and conditions. These were refused and subsequently many workers at the Bisbee mines were forcibly deported to New Mexico." <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place.html>

Jesus plays dumb—just to see what they will say—on that dusty, trudge back to Emmaus that day.

“What things?” he says. And then they proceed to tell him all the things—and how they just don’t know what to believe—even though “some women” told them he was risen.

Jesus, the Rock, is there in this hard place with his earliest followers—he’s there in their confusion, their misconceptions, their doubt, their refusal to see. The Rock can be right there, as clear as can be, and the church can just stare...

Off into the distance, off into the past. The patterns so familiar, so common, so able to last.

That’s why the church is the hard place today—between the rock and the ones who SAY we are his people, his hands and feet on the earth—the ones who live in his name and celebrate his birth.

Jesus’ own followers make this whole story hard—the ways we don’t listen, the ways we are scarred, the ways we disregard, the ways we retard the accelerations of Spirit in order to guard our hearts, our pennies, our habits of mind, our normal, our familiar, our very own kind.

The church can be the hard place because of how much we struggle to see Jesus when he’s right here on the road with us.

But it’s not just church history that makes this journey challenging—it’s the world, too. The world that just keeps dishing up more crucifixions than resurrections.

This week—there were more shootings—they just keep getting more grotesque—a missed turn, a mixed-up address, a birthday party at a place where children take dance lessons. This week—more laws passed to deny health care to our transgender siblings. This week—more books taken off school shelves around the country—under the auspices of “protecting children.”

### **Put up DeSantis book banning image**

Whose kids is Mr. DeSantis protecting? Make no mistake, no one is safe with this violence so common, so alive, with the brazen ways this country can put our history in the same chains that enslaved, the same shackles that paved the way for this economy based on free labor and exploitation to thrive.

All along this rocky road of white supremacy's oppression, the church has been right there putting gas in the tank—giving Divine sanction to the putrid stank.

### Take down DeSantis picture

I am betting Jesus' sense of humor is pretty much done at this point.

It was on the road to Emmaus—he's exasperated to say the least—come on you all—how many times do I need to explain. And he teaches them again about the prophets and the ancestors and the messiah's actual purpose. But they still don't get it.

At least they are polite—they ask him to dinner. And that's when they see him, in the breaking of bread—in the formula that the Last Supper had ingrained in their head. This is my body, broken in two. That's when they realize, Oh my gosh, Jesus, it's you!!

And right as they get it, he vanishes into thin air. He's gone and they're off to find their friends, so they can share—the Good News that they finally believe. Jesus is not a failure, he is not a disappointment, he's not a hoax or a joke or a fly in the ointment.

He's the real deal—the one who can save us, the one who reveals that God is love that never ends, that takes death into an eternity that transcends all the sorrow this world can dish out.

Jesus is the model of courage and compassion and truth, he's the liberator, the freedom-maker, the one who is not afraid to provoke the oppressor, to challenge the transgressor.

And he asks us to trust that the Spirit can empower us to heal and to be real about what it is the church is supposed to be about.

We're not about institutional clout—we're not about buildings and endowments and structures and such. We're about the God that always comes through in the clutch.

That's the God we follow and trust—the God whose bumper stick is "Freedom or Bust."

It's a destination more precious than gold, more sturdy than pews all in a row. It's a place where all can breathe, where there's room to stretch out and be, it's a way of seeing the world in all its possibility—it's the glory of God in each person's face, in the blessing of place, in the slowing of pace.

It's the place where we can stop hurting each other for another's gain, it's a place where we can finally sit down and be honest about our pain.

The rock and the hard place can become one—so we're no longer propping up an institution that got overrun by the powers the church is supposed to transform, the church who needs to never shy away from our own reform.

Grace Covenant, moving our furniture may feel monumental or maybe some see it as inconsequential, incidental. But what if it's a bend in the road that helps us to heal, what if it's the very good kind of a big deal—the kind of hard place that sharpens our faith, that calls us to trust God, to believe anew in the power and practice of grace—of the ways Jesus walked in this world and moved mountains with his powerful love.

The church needs the rock to be what sets our course—Jesus is our rock, Jesus is our source—the one who shows us that Christianity is being abused, used for evil, appropriated for greed, deployed to misguide and mislead.

The church is the hard place because just look what is being done in the name of the one who we say is love. The church is the hard place because God's name is daily taken in vain—in places where the Bible is quoted to shame, to blame, to maim those who Jesus came to free!

The church is the hard place because we've been afraid to break ranks with our delusion, our confusion, with our collective American contusions.

If we want the Rock and the hard place to come clean, to begin to let go of the mean, to be a place where all people, ALL people can be seen, then we have to be able to stretch, we have to be able to let go—we have to be able to be in the know when Jesus sidles up and we are caught in the past, when he tells us again and again that the first shall be last.

We have to practice the art of constant change—so we are the ones who are not afraid to rearrange—and it's not just the pews that we say goodbye to—let us bid farewell to the things the pews may have allowed us to accept—like “one right way,” like rigidity, like being the frozen chosen, like checking our bodies at the door, like getting stuck in the muck of white ways of thinking we know what's best.

Let us say goodbye to this arrangement also with gratitude for the beautiful memories that this wood has supported and soaked in, with gentleness toward the sweet moments, the music, the friendships that formed.

We make this shift because that's what disciples do when Jesus stops by and gives us a cue that it's time to switch gears, it's time to have the ears to hear how the story got misunderstood, how the power of love needs to be used to serve God's highest good.

This adventure we're on requires that we be no strangers to change—that we not be afraid of the times when God calls us to rearrange—to be rocks in the hard places—that can moved like that tomb-stone—rocks that don't block life-giving change, but rocks that anchor us in hard times, that we are strong enough to pick up and reposition to let Jesus have room, to really get up and get out of that tomb!

Here's to resurrection, GCPC, and all the ways we can live and breathe it—all the ways we can practice and believe it, all the ways we work with the rocks and hard places, the ways we see all the traces of Jesus here—the Rock, Jesus the liberator, may Jesus the rock that the church holds dear.

May the church become a soft place to land when the powers and principalities make their stand.

May the church be the rock that can be counted on to disrupt oppression with the breaking of bread, with the breaking of chains, with the breaking open of hearts hardened by all that constrains our human family from living the way that God calls us to live.

Trust the Rock! Free the church! So instead of the church being the hard place, we can come together for the hard work of following Jesus on whatever road he meets us on.

Thanks be to God.