



“A Rocky Witness”

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Matthew 16:13-20***

Imagine that one day while you are working away at your job, typing memos or cutting hair or fixing a broken car, that a man approaches and calls you to follow him. You aren't the type to abandon a good job, but there is something about this man, his presence, his strength, his sense of purpose, latches onto your heart and for some inexplicable reason, you drop everything and agree to follow him.

Now imagine that following him means watching while he talks to people, preaching and teaching, sometimes cutting through social convention or religious rule with words of compassion and hope. Just as you grow accustomed to his talks, he begins, with the light touch of his hand or by words alone, to heal people, not only the very ill like epileptics and paralytics, but also the blind, deaf, and the mute. He even heals people you think are beyond hope, those deeply mired mental illness or evil. And then, when he sees how many need his help, his words of kindness and compassion, he sends you speak and heal in his name.

When you return, triumphant in your own success, you listen as he tells story after story to ever-increasing crowds, stories that you struggle to understand until he explains them to you privately, earnest in his desire that you understand. Then comes the fateful week when he feeds thousands of people with a few table scraps. Not once but twice. And just when you think you have seen and heard it all, when you can't imagine what else one man can do, he appears in the mist above a lake and walks across the water. At your request, he commands you to walk on water and you do, until you are overwhelmed by your fear and he must catch and carry you back to the boat, to safety, chiding you for your doubt, for the smallness of your faith in him.

Later, after many more days of preaching and healing and miracles, not to mention disputes with the local religious authorities, he asks you a simple but profound question: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

While you ponder how you might have answered this question, had you been in the sandals of Simon Peter, disciple of Jesus, let's speculate about what might have been swirling through Peter's mind as he searched for his answer. Jacob Neusner, who has written over 950 books on rabbinic Judaism of Jesus' time, says the holy leaders of early Judaism can be divided into three distinct types: the priest, the sage, and the Messiah. Each type emphasized a different route to holiness and God.

The *priest* was centered on the Temple and believed in serving God through sacrifice and the ritual acts described by Jewish law. The priest saw Jewish society as organized around the acts performed in the Temple. So focused was the priest type on the Temple, that his world view saw the world outside its walls as less holy, then unholy, and finally unclean as it moved away from the Temple.

The *sage*, also called scribe or teacher, was centered on the Torah, the written wisdom of the Jewish people. The sage stressed study, interpretation, and application of Torah to everyday life of the Jewish people and believed the path to holiness was found in the community constructing a shared life that reflected its religious values. The sage's world view centered on life outside the Temple, in homes, streets, and markets, anywhere the people met and mingled, worked and played, and conducted business and social life together.

The *Messiah*, according to Neusner, was the type of Jewish holy leader who looked beyond temple and community to the overall status of the Jewish people, particularly as it related to other peoples, nations, and empires. The Messiah was a type of holy leader who could be a political leader, a ruler, and/or a soldier but whose defining characteristic was "game-changer." In Jesus' time, the expected Messiah was an agent of God who would rescue, save, or redeem Israel from its slavery or subordination to Rome and restore it to a condition fitting God's intent for the nation. In the Messiah, in other words, was the one who would restore hope, change the present unhappy situation, and ensure a bright, beautiful future for the Jewish people.

According to Neusner, these categories were not rigid. Like a modern pastor who is preacher, counselor, and activist, the ancient holy leaders were boundary-straddlers, being priest-sage or sage-Messiah, or priest-Messiah. Neusner himself says that Jesus is portrayed as all three in the gospels: the perfect priest and sacrifice, the sage who knew the Torah far better than other teachers, and Messiah.

When Jesus asks Peter "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds "Messiah," not once but twice, as if to make his answer doubly clear. He says "Messiah", the Hebrew word for anointed one and he says "Son of the living God", another expression found in the Hebrew scripture that means, not the biological or metaphysical son of God, but agent of God come to fulfill God's will. In other gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, son of God will come to mean a parent-child relationship, but here we can read Peter's response to Jesus' question not just as "Messiah" but Messiah-Messiah!

Peter answers quickly and emphatically. At this moment, he is not troubled by the doubt or denial that will come later. Jesus affirms his emphatic choice, praises that he answered by

faith, and declares Peter's faith a rock and the foundation of the future church, but cautions the Peter and the disciple not to spread the word that Jesus has claimed for himself, the title of Messiah. The danger of claiming that title in the time of the Herods and the Roman Empire, we come to know, is great.

Peter's answer – *Messiah, Messiah!* – and Jesus' acclamation brings us back to that question you may have been pondering: *Who do you say that Jesus is?* If you can imagine yourself once again in Peter's sandals, the stakes on your answer are high because the fate of the church rests on your answer.

How your answer will undoubtedly reflect where you come from, how you were raised, and your personal religious experience, including your time in and outside of church. And because faith is often formed over a lifetime, your answer may vary with your age, reflecting your life experience. Lacking a scientific survey of your views, I naturally turned to YouTube where you can find an interesting array of interviews where someone blessed with a microphone comes up and asks a stranger, out of the blue, the simple question: *Who was Jesus?* The answers are interesting, sometimes touching and sometimes funny. In the videos I saw, they included:

- *A Ghandi-type guy*
- *A great teacher*
- *A really chill dude (also expressed a nice man or a good man)*
- *Redeemer*
- *A perfect human*
- *A Savior who died for my sins*
- *A hippy with really good morals*
- *One of the prophets,*
- *A bloke in the Bible,*
- *God, God-Man, Part of God, and Son of God.*

Under these contemporary responses I can still see Jacob Neusner's categories. A Ghandi-type guy, a great teacher, a chill dude, a hippy with good morals that would be a *sage*. Savior, Redeemer, a perfect human that would be the *priest and sacrifice*. It's also interesting but not surprising to see that Messiah didn't come up as a contemporary answer in the YouTube interviews.

To me, Messiah is a word like Lord. Both are historically and theologically significant but to the people I converse with, both lack a clear definition, and carry a lot of baggage. I don't know if you've notice but if you announce Jesus is my Lord, about half the people who hear will start looking around for Lord Voldemort from the Harry Potter books. In similar manner, Messiah is a "room-clearer", which is to say that announcing: "Jesus is my Messiah" would clear the room of just about everyone who knows and loves me, including my own mother. So, like many of you, I have, to date, generally avoided Peter's approach and stuck with safer options in the sage category: preacher, teacher, and role model.

But since we are here in church – and the ushers have bolted the doors – I will tell you that, after reflecting on today’s scripture, I’ve come to the conclusion that Jesus *is* my Messiah. I’ve also come to the conclusion that Peter’s faith in Jesus’s Messiahship is not only a very good basis for the ancient church but also a firm foundation for our own church today.

To begin to understand Jesus as Messiah, I had to break the concept of Messiah down to its most basic elements. According to Neusner, the Messiah type was a belief system that, in the midst of a broken world, offered hope in a better future. So I asked myself, how and when has Jesus offered hope for a better future?

I didn’t have to look far. When I came back to church after an absence of nearly 30 years, I had this one big question: what’s so great about life? Of course, beneath that one question were layers and layers of questions about my own personal suffering and the suffering of those around me. The logical part of me took the Christianity of my childhood, which taught me that accepting Christ as my personal savior meant primarily eternal life after death, and applied it to my current circumstances, which left me with the most basic but disturbing question: why live? Why life?

The answer I found—that my life here at Eden over the last six years has helped me find—has many parts, not all of them logical, most of them spiritual. The first part of my answer came from hearing that Christians have always placed a high value on life because God declared it, with all its challenges and realities, good at creation, however and whenever you believed that occurred. God looked at it and said, “This is good.” The second part was realizing that how profoundly touched I was by the thought, expressed in the Gospel of John, that Jesus was the Incarnate Word, a source of light and good that was intimately and completely interconnected with the both creation and sustenance of life. I was and continue to be touched by these familiar words: “All things, including life, come into being through the Word and without the Word, not one thing comes into being.” The third part was feeling that through his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated not only death, but the *power* that the fear of death holds over all of our lives, forcing our thoughts to our end when they would be better focused on our present, however troubled that present might be. And the last part is the realization that my thinking, talking, and following Jesus was not a one-time event, but a process that, over the course of several years, gave and is giving me hope in a better future for myself, my family, for the world.

Through the story of Jesus, I went from wondering “Why live?” to having hope in a better future. So when asked: Who do I say that Jesus is? Incarnate Word, Co-Creator, Death Defeater, Bringer of Hope. In other words, game changer. Messiah? *Yes, it all boils down to Messiah, Messiah!*

Like Peter, you and I have a lot of choices when we choose who we say Jesus is. Peter could have chosen Messiah, or he could have chosen priest or sage or some combination of the above. But when the gospel writer of Matthew recorded Peter proclaiming Jesus as “Messiah, Messiah” and Jesus affirming this declaration, he was saying that the foundation, the strength, and future of the church was built on what God alone had placed in Peter’s heart rather than what was written in flesh and blood. It was Peter’s profession of faith, rather than anything he had seen and heard that would be the basis of the future church.

The same is true today. The foundation of our church is not what we exclusively think about Jesus but it is also what we believe about Jesus and how Jesus has affected our life. It's about a great leader who has given each of us great hope in the future. If it wasn't, then we might be here today in the United Church of Gandhi, or the United Church of Martin Luther King, two other individuals we know as game changers and hope bringers. We aren't. We are here today in a church, founded on faith in Jesus, built on action in the name of Jesus, and always growing, not by convincing arguments or compelling logic but by personal testimony and by our willingness to explore our questions about the life, teachings, death, and divinity of Jesus. Like Peter, we have our doubts and our denials, especially in times of trouble and danger, but always our church is an expression of what we too are willing to profess about Jesus. As Peter found out, it's not always easy to offer Jesus to others. The words we use have lost their meaning in a world that doesn't want to hear about faith. But, as I discovered, knowing what you believe about Jesus is a very good place to start the conversation.

My friends, God calls us to reflect on not only who Jesus is to us—be it priest, sage, or Messiah-Messiah, be it teacher, preacher, or role model—but also on who we are willing to say to others that Jesus is to us. It is not our answer, supported by logic and evidence, that matters most, but that we speak, like Peter, with love and enthusiasm, giving Jesus a name, a title, a description that matches the depth of the feeling we hold in our heart for all that he has meant to us, to our family, and to our church. Let the true and honest expression of your heart be the rock of your faith and the foundation of our church of Christ. Amen.