

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

In Praise of a New Alchemy¹

Ezekiel 3.12-15, 11.1,13, 17-19; Luke 24.1-12

Russ Dean, April 4, 2010



In the 8th century, a Persian by the name of Jabir ibn Hayyan, consolidated the age-old quest for immortality into a pursuit that he claimed could also convert common metals into gold. (If you are going to live forever, I suppose you might as well live well!) That elusive substance, which he claimed could produce eternal life, was known by Jabir, in his native Arabic, as “al-iksir.” Since Jabir’s fascination with the science or pseudo-science or philosophy called alchemy, his “al-iksir” has been peddled by countless “snake oil salesmen,” whose elixirs of life have promised eternal beauty and youth to any who could “show me the money.” Yes, the quest of Juan Ponce de Leon (or, Pahnce d’ Leon, if you learned about him in a South Carolina grade school!) – this quest for the Fountain of Youth precedes him by eight centuries.

According to the great Persian, Jabir, the success of this quest was dependent upon a physical substance which could “transmute” one or more of the four essential qualities of a material into that unique combination of those qualities which comprised gold. This substance was purported to be a reddish powder derived from the mysterious Philosophers’ Stone. Ironically, then, the quest for eternal life depended upon what might well be the very least organic of all materials – a stone.

That same paradox is alive and well in our scripture, as we have seen so clearly this week. Jesus warned the Pharisees that if his disciples remained silent, *even the stones would shout out* (Luke 19.40) the praise of God. The non-living would give voice to the source of all life. Yet when Jesus needed that voice the most... where were those stones he so confidently

¹ The title of the sermon comes from this poem by Robert Donne: “Study me then you who / Shall lovers be / All the next world, / That is, at the next / Spring: For I am / Every dead thing / In whom love / wrought new alchemy”

proclaimed? When the crowds turned from cheering to jeering... Where were those stones?

When the religious leaders cowed to fear, the political leaders bowed to public pressure... Where were those stones? When his so-called friends proved that they were just that, and abandoned him like his worst enemies... Where were those stones – crying out in praise... shouting in his defense? All were silent. Even God seemed *a stone's throw away* (Luke 22.41).

And on that Good Friday, those now-silent stones seemed to have had the final word. For after the sky turned dark and his life was finished, his mission complete, a silent disciple, who had feared to follow in the light, collected the broken body of Jesus and laid him in an expensive, *rock-hewn tomb* (Luke 23.53). Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body and laid his voiceless frame on a slab of cold, silent stone. Where were they? All the stones in whom he had proclaimed so much faith?

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the only inevitability of life, the only lesson written in stone, is that “all true stories end in the stone cold silence of death.”²

Then came Sunday morning... *And as the glory of the Lord rose from its place, (Jesus) heard behind (him) the sound of loud rumbling; it was the sound of the wings of (life) brushing against one another, and the sound of the (stone) beside them, that sounded like a loud rumbling...* (Ezekiel 3.12ff)

Ezekiel's prophecy is not a foreshadowing of resurrection... but it sure sounded like it to me when I read it in preparation for Easter Sunday! Surely that stone rumbled as it was rolled in place. And surely it rumbled as it gave way to life. When from that *rock-hewn tomb* of death walked the Lord of Life – finally those stones speak their voice: *He is risen*, indeed! (Matthew

² (Though he also believes in resurrection!) my friend, John Ballenger, once reminded me, starkly, “All true stories end in death.”

28.6) And for 2,000 years the followers of a once-dead Lord have been proclaiming the praise of those stones, in a new alchemy:

Come to him (Peter says), a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2. 4-5).

The result of Easter is a paradox. It is a living stone. Rock solid, impervious to death. Shouting the praise of God to the challenge of all logic. Where there is no life – God brings life. *In the beginning... the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters... And there was light... (Genesis 1.1) and there was life... and it was good! For a people wandering in the desert, grumbling of their thirst, Moses called forth his staff, struck the rock of Horeb, and a stream of life burst forth. It was a water that quenched more than throats parched by the sands of the Sinai (Exodus 17). To a woman at a well, who stood in need of so much more in her life than a bucket of water, Jesus proclaimed, *Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty...* (John 4.13).*

Easter proclaims a New Alchemy – which is as old as life itself. And our world is dying to hear this good news.

Now, if you have spent even a moment in the last ten minutes trying to figure out if your pastor believes he is speaking literal truth or that he is speaking in metaphors, you're in the wrong class. If that's what you're looking for, Science 101 is just down the hall. It's a great class. The professors are excellent. I highly recommend it, because everyone needs at least a 101-level understanding it to be equipped for a 21st century world. But this is not science class.

This is a graduate seminar on the worship of God. And today's lecture is the Praise of a New Alchemy, not the Chemistry of an old one.³

In this laboratory of worship, we build up more than we break down, synthesize more than analyze. Here, we sing more than we lecture, and praise more than we prove. The other is important. Necessary even. It must inform our faith. But Easter morning is the best day on which to sing the truth of the ironic words of Wallace Stevens who boldly declared,

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.⁴

We should never stoop to reduce the resurrection of Jesus to the simple category of fact. Oh, it is more than that. It is truth, deep truth that cannot be worked out in any lab – except the laboratory of life. And in that laboratory, no scientific formulas are needed – only the praise of one who has known such resurrection as a life-altering truth. In other words – your praise! When the Church shouts with the stones of an empty tomb, “He is risen, indeed!” it is not describing molecular biology. It is praising something much deeper. It is speaking a truth that it knows from

³ Today's prayer of confession was: We want to believe, O God – but we want to believe only what we can see and touch and taste and prove. So we make faith the equivalent of belief and insist the Bible is “true” and all miracles are “real.” Forgive us on this greatest day of celebration when even resurrection becomes an object of scrutiny – when Mystery itself is silenced by the skepticism of post-modern minds. Open us not to a new belief – but to a new way of believing. That we might know what we already know – that He Is Risen, indeed! Amen.

⁴ This quotation has come to me by the way of so many others – shared or “borrowed!” from another minister. I have no other knowledge of Wallace Stevens than this information from Wikipedia: “Wallace Stevens (October 2, 1879 – August 2, 1955) was an American Modernist poet. He was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, educated at Harvard and then New York Law School, and spent most of his life working as a lawyer for an insurance company in Connecticut...” I know nothing of Stevens' faith (if any) nor his theology, but I find this quotation quite pertinent to a 21st-century Christian faith. Though it would be undoubtedly disturbing to many, I am grateful to have been introduced by Stevens to the important distinction between fictional truth and factual truth – and if these were the only categories by which we could frame the resurrection of Jesus, I would not hesitate to call it “fictional” truth. Because there were no eye-witness accounts of the resurrection event, no scientific proof, and only the testimony of four theologically-motivated, widely divergent sources called the Gospels to attest to its veracity, the resurrection would (by definition) have to be deemed less than a “fact.” Yet who could deny that it is not more than fact, also! How have the greatest truths always been communicated? By stories... fictions! Ancient mythologies, ancient and modern parables, novels, plays... all seek by the telling of stories to communicate a truth deeper than fact. Regardless the “facts” involved in the resurrection of Jesus, the Truth cannot be disputed – for it is proven every time a believer says *and he appeared also to me!* (1 Corinthians 15.8)

the heart – a truth known by *hearts of stone* that have been made *hearts of flesh* by the touch of the living God (Ezekiel 3, and 36.26).

If the fickle crowd is inevitable... the betraying voice... the disappointing silence... And it is inevitable. And if the experience of the absence of God is inevitable... that sense that God is *a stone's throw* (or the chasm of the universe) away... And it is inevitable. And if death is inevitable. And it is inevitable. Then we must dare to proclaim that just as these experiences are real, written in stone in this experiment of life – then the Church must ever more boldly dare to proclaim that a Deeper Truth is at work within us, among us.⁵ A New Alchemy of surprise and grace and order and life... a surprise of resurrection, which is also inevitable. Written in stone. Easter tells us that God is moving this world in the direction of newness and hope and celebration. The resurrection of Jesus demands that we believe the truth of which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, that though it is long – sometimes unbearably long – the “moral arc of the universe... [is bending] toward justice!” We must believe!

So let the stones shout. You, who are *living stones*... *chosen and precious in God's sight* (1 Peter 2), when you have known resurrection, do not be afraid to call it just that.⁶ When your marriage, when seemed destined for a premature death, is revived to life – Praise the New Alchemy. When your new job gives renewal, or when the loss of a job gives you a chance to step back and re-group, maybe to reconsider your priorities and the direction of your life – Praise the New Alchemy. When relationships are mended, when forgiveness is offered or received – Praise the New Alchemy. When you find goodness in unexpected places – no matter how small, a kind smile amid a frenzied culture, a thank you note received, a birthday wish extended – Praise the

⁵ I was thinking here of C.S. Lewis's phrase “deep magic from the dawn of time” and “deeper magic,” from his *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

⁶ I am playing again on the distinctions (or lack thereof?) between the affirmations made of Jesus (Peter said of Jesus that he was the *stone, chosen and precious* – but aren't we, also?), and between the resurrection of Jesus and our own resurrections.

New Alchemy. And when death comes, as it will – without resorting to a “pie in the sky by and by” theology of wish-fulfillment – Praise the New Alchemy, which even then dares to find life where there is no life. New life in memories. New life in the living legacies of family and friends. New life, even in the blessed hope of the forever presence of God, which the Church has called heaven.⁷

Praise the New Alchemy. For resurrection is breaking the stones of death,⁸ all around us, and hints of God’s new day are dawning, even amid the fear and paranoia that surrounds us. I can see it! I can smell it! I can hear it!

Praise the New Alchemy, which has been written on our living hearts.

Christ is risen.

Christ is risen, indeed!

May it be so!

⁷ The former pastor of this church, Charlie Milford, consistently referred to afterlife/heaven as our “blessed hope.” Amy Jacks Dean’s chosen phrase, when speaking of this hope, is “the forever presence of God.”

⁸ Again this is an allusion to CS Lewis, who, when telling of the re-birth/resurrection of Aslan (his Christ figure), has the stone altar on which Aslan had been slain, broken irreparably, symbolic of the ending of death and death’s hold over us, forever.