

# Sacred Stones<sup>1</sup>

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At one time, the confluence of two powerful rivers churned with such energy that it created smooth, spherical stones. The Lakota people named one of these rivers *Íŋyaŋwakaŋapi Wakpá*, “Stone-Make-For-Themselves River,” and called the stones *Íŋyaŋ Wakháŋagapi Othí*, “sacred stones.”<sup>3</sup> The Lakotas use these sacred stones in prayer and ceremony and view them, like the river, plants, and animals, as a living part of all relations.

European explorers and colonizers who came to the region also saw and admired the smooth, spherical stones shaped by the churning waters. But instead of sacred stones, they saw stones shaped like cannonballs, like ammunition for war. And so they named that river the Cannonball River, which converges with the Missouri River near Cannonball, North Dakota.<sup>4</sup> Sacred stones or cannonballs? Perspective shapes practice.

This conflict of perspective between Indigenous and colonizer peoples shapes a long history of struggle on and for Lakota land. Take, for example, the 1874 gold mining expedition led by General Custer that catapulted a gold rush of settlers into the sacred Black Hills. Or consider the damming of the Missouri River in the 1950s by the Army Corps of Engineers to create Lake Oahe for hydropower. Lakota burial grounds and fertile land for gathering plant medicines were flooded, and the people say that many elders died of heartbreak from the loss. The more recent Standing Rock Sioux tribe’s resistance to the destruction of sacred sites and contamination of water by the oil-carrying Dakota Access Pipeline represents the latest struggle in this long history. Sacred stones or cannonballs?

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1 Katerina originally shared this piece as a sermon during chapel at the AMBS Rooted and Grounded Conference, April 21, 2017.

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3 Jordan Engel and Dakota Wind, “Dakota Access Pipeline Indigenous Protest Map,” *The Decolonial Atlas*, September 16, 2016, <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2016/09/07/dakota-access-pipeline-indigenous-protest-map/>.

4 I learned these stories in September 2016 when I visited the Standing Rock encampments near the Missouri River as part of a delegation of Mennonites through the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition.

What do we see when we look at stones, at earth? Earth as weapon and tool, earth as a resource for human use, or earth as sacred, alive, and in kinship with us? In the colonized language and imagination, stones are the epitome of dead matter. They can't move on their own. They can't speak. They have no spirit, no sentience. A rock is a rock, right?

Inspired by the Indigenous-led movement at Standing Rock and congregational study about the Doctrine of Discovery, a small group from my congregation—Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana—went to visit the nearest nation of Indigenous neighbors, the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. We spoke with Marcus Winchester, their Director for Language and Culture, to learn more about Potawatomi ways of seeing the world. Marcus shared with us that words in the Potawatomi language, like many other Indigenous languages, are grouped by inanimate and animate categories.<sup>5</sup> Human-made things, like tables, are among those things considered inanimate. Yet rocks, water, fire, places, and even weather patterns are considered animate. One would not refer to a stone as an “it,” nor by the English-gendered “he” or “she,” but with a Potawatomi pronoun signifying the stone's inherent aliveness. Since learning this, I've been reading Scripture with a new lens, with an eye for how what I once perceived as inanimate is part of the biblical story.

For example, I noticed that the stone Jacob uses as a wilderness pillow is not just any rock but an aid to his dreams that he anoints with oil and declares to be the place of God (Gen 28:17–18). In Deuteronomy 27, we are told that Yahweh's preferred altar is made of “unhewn” stones untouched by human technology. Stones are key witnesses of divine-human encounters and are set up as markers of remembrance, as the song says, “Here I raise my Ebenezer,” (referencing 1 Sam 7:12). Or consider Job 5:23, which says that as a result of God's deliverance “you shall be in league with the *stones* of the field, and the wild animals shall be at peace with you” (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup>

Before Easter this year, I noticed the stones in the Passion narrative for the first time, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. Just as Jesus breathed his last, the earth quaked violently, and *rocks split* (Matt 27:50–51).

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

When that Word fell silent on Golgotha—when, after a loud cry, both the high sound of his nervous system and the low sound of his beating heart stopped—the earth shook with grief. Rocks made the only sound they could, splitting open with small explosions that were their best version of tears. . . . The whole inanimate world leapt in to fill that silence, while

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5 Other Indigenous peoples understand everything as animate, or alive.

6 All Scripture references are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

poor, dumb humanity stood speechless before the cross.<sup>7</sup>

In front of the cross, it seems the inanimate world is not so dead after all. The very stones cry out in testimony when we humans do not give voice! The living earth shakes with apocalyptic anger against those who would kill God's son, and the spirit of the rocks cry out when the Crucified One releases his spirit and power. How can they help but split in two when our Lord Christ, in whom all things hold together, is broken on the cross?

Even though the myriad voices of earth cry out, even though Creation groans in expectant longing for the revealing of the children of God (Rom 8:19), many of us are speechless before the cross of our day. We are speechless in the shadow of the cross that now looms over Creation, the cross of climate crisis. As we face this cross, we may wonder, has God abandoned us to sin and destruction? Has God abandoned us to unparalleled desecration and defilement of God's holy Creation? Have the powers of domination triumphed in their all-out extraction of life from this planet as they enslave people and creatures—even water and rocks—for the pursuit of abstract profit and control?

Before this cross, we seek to respond with human words and wisdom, but they seem too little and too late. We find our tongues tied, our technologies inadequate, our weapons powerless, and our fact-altering politicians asking, like Pilate, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Even our most eloquent theologies seem to shrivel in front of the cross of climate meltdown.

And yet the rest of Creation is not paralyzed. New storm systems fling down their fury, from hurricanes to polar vortexes; Leviathan tightens her vice grip around small island nations with floods and rising sea levels, and all color drains from coral reefs bleached by warming waters. Despite our silence and stunned inaction before the cross, the rocks cry out! Perhaps if we give ear, we might join their lament, might feel our own hearts splitting open, and allow the cracking of control to release us into God's own heartbeat.

After Jesus released control over his own life on the cross, he entered into the tomb for three quiet days, held by stones. Have you ever imagined the perspective of those stones? What was it like to be that cave hewn into the mountain, that slab where the Lord's cool body lay against cool rock with the smell of spices scenting the air? Did the stones cradle him in death, humming the words *Awake, O sleeper!* (Eph 5:14, ESV)? Or, having fallen asleep with him, did they, too, gasp again when God made breath enter this second Adam, firstborn of all Creation who has reconciled all things in himself (Col 1:17)?

Stones are the unrecognized first witnesses of Jesus's resurrection, even before the women disciples. In Matthew's Gospel, an angel of the Lord rolls away the stone from the tomb as the earth quakes. Yet in Mark, the women disciples

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1998), 46–47.

look up and see that “the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back” (Mark 16:4, NRSV). Could rolling have been the *stone’s* initiative, a way of bowing down to the Risen One, our New Creation?

Jesus, the transcendent and immanent Resurrected One, invites us to join a living new Creation in Christ. For those of us who seek to live in Christ, the reality of resurrection brings *all* Creation to life in Christ again, not only our own selves stuck in the ways of death and destruction. With resurrection eyes, we begin to see the world anew as a living, breathing whole of which we are honored members who also show honor to the rest. We recognize that the world is “charged with the grandeur of God,” and there “lives the dearest freshness deep down things,” in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.<sup>8</sup>

This spiritual cosmology poses tantalizing possibilities for our actions and practices. Take worship, for example. When we come alive in Christ and awaken to the aliveness of the rest of God’s created world, we can see stones and trees as worshippers along with us, and perhaps like early Anabaptists in the 1500s, who were compelled by threat of persecution, we can return to the practice of gathering for worship outdoors in forest chapels or in sanctuaries of caves.<sup>9</sup> Imagine if we shared with land and water a portion of the Eucharist, our Great Thanksgiving, as a sign of shared resurrection life with all creation. Or, in our pastoral practices, what if we made pastoral care visits to sick and polluted rivers in our watershed, along with the human communities nearby? Though practices like these may stretch our imaginations, renewed imagination is precisely what is needed in this age of climate crisis.

The dominant imagination, even in church communities, has been malformed by hundreds of years of looking at earth and seeing cannonballs rather than sacred stones. Our church practices, if renewed by more ancient ways of seeing the world as sacred and alive, can reform communities of witness to resist the powers that would hinder new Creation. Though the way seems difficult and oftentimes too little and too late, we are not without friends and guides in this work.

Against all odds, there is a pope who has taken the name Francis, the Christ-like man who spoke to Brother Sun and Sister Moon. Against all odds, Indigenous peoples who have survived tremendous trauma and loss continue to call those of us in the dominant settler culture to wake up and listen to the voices of life around us, for the sake of the survival of all. And against all odds, Christ is not dead but is resurrected as our *living* cornerstone. The Risen Christ

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8 “God’s Grandeur,” *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985).

9 See, for example, the Wild Church Network, a network of congregations that meet outside of buildings “to re-acquaint, re-cover, and re-member our congregations as loving participants of a larger community.” <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com>.

animates us, too, to be living stones, as 1 Peter 2:5 says—*living stones* built into a holy home for God in this sacred temple of Creation.