

“Upon *This* Rock?”

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[Matthew 16:13-20](#)

In 1976, there was a movie released that would eventually spawn six sequels, spanning nearly 40 years. Now, I was one year old when Rocky was released, so I doubt I saw the movie at the time. Regardless, I did see the movie at some point later and while I don't remember too much of it – most vividly I remember Rocky drinking raw egg yolks and running on the beach – I do remember Rocky's perseverance. He had a goal and he worked to achieve it. Even in the sequels, that perseverance is there. In one of them, Rocky says *“it ain't about how hard you hit, it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward, how much you can take and keep moving forward.”* Yes, Rocky persevered, through seven movies and almost forty years. He is a no-nonsense kind of guy.

But today's gospel lesson tells us about another guy named “Rocky” and this Rocky isn't nearly as dependable. You may know this other “Rocky” by the name Simon or the name Peter. Simon was his given name, but Jesus changed his name to Peter or *Petros*, which means “rock.” Like the name “Rocky” today, the name Peter or *Petros* then wasn't a common name. Jesus' use of the word as a name may have been the first such use. But this new “Rocky” – or Peter – wasn't anything like the Rocky we know from the movies. He was not very dependable. This was the guy who stepped out of the boat and walked on the water – for a moment, and then he began to sink. This was the guy who told Jesus “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you” and then denied Him three times. This was the guy who, after Jesus' death and resurrection and showing himself to the disciples, decides to go fishing. Why would Jesus put such a nickname – Rocky, Rock, Peter – on such an undependable, un-*rock*-like guy? Why would Jesus announce

that this is the rock on which He will build His church? It is a puzzling thing – why would Jesus put His message and the task of spreading the Good News into the hands of weak and fragile people like Peter...and like *us*?

Perhaps because that's the only kind of people there are. We are – all of us – weak and fragile. And we are – all of us – strong and sturdy. We have our great moments, and our not-so-great moments, just like Peter. Jesus has entrusted His church to those who can give the right answer to that little question that He asks – a question that is really not little at all. Jesus asks two questions. First, “Who do others say that I am?” But that's just the warm-up question. It's not the biggie. The important question comes next. “Who do *you* say that I am?” And Simon answers “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And *that* was what made Jesus called Him Peter, or Rock. *That* confession is the essential one for all believers. *That* is what Jesus built His church upon. And that statement is *still* what Jesus' church is built upon.

There are those who say that Jesus was just a prophet or just a good teacher or just a good storyteller, but not the Messiah, not the Son of the living God. As C.S. Lewis made plain in his book *Mere Christianity*, Jesus either was who He said He was, or He was a madman or worse. He cannot be simply a good moral teacher and claim to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. For if He were not the Messiah, He would not be moral to claim such. The authorities would have every right to crucify Him as a blasphemer. As Lewis said, “let us not come with any of that patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. Nor did he intend to.” And so it is that Peter's answer to Jesus' question is so essential. It is the foundation on which the church is built. It is the basis for our beliefs.

And Peter gets the answer right! But as we'll discuss next week, he very quickly gets it wrong. He calls Jesus the Messiah, but he doesn't know what kind of Messiah Jesus came to be. In the next passage in Matthew, we'll read how Jesus said “Get behind me, Satan” to none other than Peter. And so it may seem a bit disturbing that Jesus has put His trust in this Peter. Actually,

though, I find it comforting. I find it reassuring to know that if Jesus can work through Peter, He can work through somebody like me. Peter made a mess of things, and so do I, maybe even so do some of you. Today, I may make that great confession of faith – “Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” and tomorrow my words or actions may deny that truth, just as Peter’s did when he denied Jesus three times. Today, I may stand in this pulpit and say the right words, and this week, I may not always act like a follower of Jesus Christ. I won’t always be one of Jesus’ *rocks*. I imagine the same is true for you. And yet, Jesus chose to build His church on people like Peter and people like you and me. And I have to believe that Jesus knew what He was doing.

Jesus knew what a powerful question He was asking, even if we don’t realize the power of the question. “Who do you say that I am?” is foundational. It is the bedrock of all of our beliefs and the lives that we lead. If we say that Jesus is the Messiah, that is not the *end* of our beliefs. Saying that Jesus is the Messiah doesn’t end the discussion; it begins the discussion. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then we have to admit we are called to live lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. We cannot say “Jesus is the Messiah” and then, in good faith, ignore what Jesus calls us to do! We cannot say “Jesus is the Son of the living God,” and then contradict that statement by living lives that are in opposition to what Jesus taught. If we truly confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then we have to act like it. And, yes, at times, we are going to fail. Yes, we are going to not get it right all the time. Yes, we are going to do things that put us in need of the forgiveness and grace of our loving God. Yes, sometimes, we will, like Peter, step out in faith and then start to sink. But Jesus can and *will* use us, imperfect though we are, to build His church, if we continue to answer that all-important question with the right answer.

We have to have the right answer – that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of the living God. And we have to not just know it; we have to “get it.” We have to internalize it, make it part of who we are, so that our actions and words in our daily lives more and more reflect what we say is true.

And that foundational belief gives Jesus something on which to build His church. But let's be clear about what that means. "The church" doesn't mean this brick structure, wonderful and historic, though it is. It's like that wonderful children's song reminds us: "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together." Too often we simply "come to church." But there's a big difference between coming to church and *being* the church. This building, while nice, is not what Jesus was talking about when He talked of building His church. He was talking about the church universal, composed of believers of all times and places. He was talking about us, whether we are gathered here, or – more importantly, actually – when we are out in the world, living our daily lives. That is when it is most important that we are the church, that we act like we are the church. We come to this place to worship the living God, to be refreshed and renewed, and to learn about our God and about our response to our God. But this is not the only place that Jesus needs us to be solid rocks. This is not the only place where we await Jesus to call us "Rocky" or Peter. It is in the living of our daily lives that we are truly the church that Jesus Christ has built, over these 2000 years, using such imperfect people as Peter and you and me, using believers who say with certainty, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Amen