



### Living Stones

Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; May 3, 2026

Psalms 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10

When I began studying Celtic Christianity around 2010, I soon came across stories of Iona. Iona, a small island on the western coast of Scotland, is considered the cradle of Celtic Christianity. In the year 563, the Irish monk Saint Columba arrived there with twelve companions, carrying little more than faith and courage in their hands. From that rocky edge of land, a community took root—one that became a center of learning, art, and missions, sending out teachers and storytellers who carried the gospel across Scotland. Over time, Iona came to be known as a “thin place,” a landscape where the veil between heaven and earth feels paper thin. The island is home to the ancient Iona Abbey, whose stones still echo with centuries of songs and prayers, and it remains a wellspring of Celtic spirituality—a way of faith that listens closely to the rhythms of creation and trusts that the holy is woven into land, sea, and sky.

When a friend who traveled to Iona brought me a stone from the island, I began to dream about stepping foot on that sacred soil myself. Fast forward 7 years, and Kinney and I joined a group of Presbyterians from Flint River Presbytery in Georgia to explore the roots of our faith in Scotland. Honestly, I was sold as soon as I learned that the itinerary included an afternoon on Iona. Now, mind you, it was only an afternoon—and a rainy one at that—but placing my feet on that sacred soil is an experience I shall never forget. It nourished my soul to visit the chapel, light a candle in prayer, and linger amidst those ancient stones—that seemed to vibrate with the prayers of generations of believers.

And standing there among those weathered stones, I found myself wondering about the way Scripture so often turns our attention to rock and foundation, to names shaped from the earth itself. Stones. Sacred stones. Rocks. And that is where Simon Peter comes into view. This fisherman from Galilee becomes one of the most influential voices in the early church. Simon is his given name, but Jesus gives him another one—Peter, “the rock.” It is a name that points toward calling and responsibility, a life that will bear weight in this newborn community of faith. And yet, even with that title, Peter does not mistake himself for the foundation. He understands, with a humility shaped by grace, that Christ alone is the cornerstone—the one upon whom the whole structure rests, the one who gives alignment, strength, and unity to everything being built. That is why the image of a temple made of living stone speaks so powerfully to him. He knows what it is to be shaped and placed, to be given a role within something far greater than himself. So, he invites others to come to Christ, the cornerstone, and to be built together into a new kind of dwelling place—a living temple, a royal priesthood, where lives themselves become offerings of worship before God.

The cornerstone. In the ancient world it carried enormous importance. A cornerstone was not decorative or symbolic in the way we sometimes use the word today. It was structural. Essential. In the long work of building, the cornerstone was the first stone set into place and everything else depended on it. Its angles determined the angles of every wall. Its position determined the strength of the whole structure. If the cornerstone was set incorrectly—if it tilted even slightly—the walls would drift. The roof would strain. The building itself would weaken over time. But if the cornerstone was true—steady, level, secure—then every other stone could find its place. That’s the image Peter gives us for Christ. Jesus does not serve as a mere helpful example. Jesus is the teacher among teachers—THE cornerstone—the one upon whom everything else is measured, aligned, and held.

I find this metaphor to be deeply comforting because most of us know what it feels like to build on unstable ground. We build our lives on success—until success falters. We build our lives on approval—until approval fades. We build our lives on calendars packed with plans—until our plans fall apart. We stack expectations upon expectations, hoping the structure will hold. But when the storms come—as they always do—we discover how fragile those foundations can be.

But Peter invites us to imagine something different: not a life balanced precariously on shifting sand, but a life aligned to a cornerstone that does not move. A cornerstone chosen and precious. A cornerstone that serves as the very foundation of our faith.

It is worth noting that the letter acknowledges rejection. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.” Jesus himself—the one dismissed, doubted, and cast aside, was raised as the very foundation of God’s work in the world. There is mystery here, but also deep reassurance because it means that God often builds with what the world overlooks. What seems weak may become strong. What seems broken may become the very place where grace begins to take shape. And that includes us. “Like living stones,” the letter says. Not identical stones. Not perfect stones. Living stones. Some of us feel smooth and steady, shaped by years of faith. Others feel rough around the edges, uncertain of where we belong. Some feel strong and secure. Others feel fragile, worn thin by grief or worry or exhaustion. Yet the promise is the same: Each stone matters. Each stone has a place. Each stone is set in relation to the cornerstone. That last detail matters most because our strength does not come from standing alone. It comes from alignment—being set in relationship to Christ, the one who holds everything together.

As followers of Jesus, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. When I think of them, I think of people like Barbara Wilson—who had a such a heart for service and loved singing in the choir. John Zirkle—a theologian at heart who mentored and encouraged so many of us—was a champion of this church. He and Eva never tired of sharing the goings on of FPC and inviting those without a church home to join us. And Carolyn Hearn. She has been gone two years now and I still miss my dear friend so much. As I was preparing today’s sermon, I remembered a story she told me about one of our former pastors—back in the day when it was generally the pastor who led the children’s sermon. Dr. Keith Nickel was quite an academic, so much so, Carolyn said that when it came time for the children’s sermon, she always paid close attention because she knew that was all she was going to get!

When I look out at the living stones among us now, three in particular come to mind. Each Sunday, one of them steps forward to this place with all the courage they can muster. They take something from the Scriptures and lower it to a child’s height, offering encouragement and insight during what we call “Time with Young Disciples.” You may have noticed that I said their task takes courage. If you doubt that, I can offer proof. No matter how many times Heather sends out an invitation for others to sign up for Time with Young Disciples, the reply is always the same—crickets in the tall, tall grass. Of course, it is a delight to share the stories of our faith with children. But it can also be ever so slightly intimidating. I mean, you never quite know what question will be asked or what unexpected wisdom might tumble out. So, you have to be quick on your feet.

All kidding aside, Kay Gowan, Jennifer Gowan, and Jeff Drees provide a beautiful gift. Week by week, they serve as living stones among us. They take the words of Scripture and shape them

into something children can grasp, while also planting small seeds in the hearts of the rest of us. Through their care, we witness what it looks like to be part of the house God is building.

And that is where Peter's words meet us today. Near the end of our reading, he offers one of the most tender declarations in all of Scripture: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

When I think back to that rainy afternoon on Iona, I remember how those ancient stones spoke to me. They did not exist on their own. Each one leaned on another, held in place by the careful work of hands long gone, yet still bearing witness. Perhaps that is what Peter hopes we will see. Not a scattered pile of stones, but a living house—each of us set beside the other, held together in Christ. Long after our own prayers have been whispered and our own footsteps have faded, others will come after us. May they rest their hands upon the stones we leave behind, and find that by the grace of God, the house still stands. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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