

## What Means These Stones?

Joshua 4:20-24

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When I was a younger man I participated in a study exchange to Sweden and while there became acquainted with rune stones. **(RUNE STONE IMAGE)** These stones were carved and then erected to commemorate great events and the lives of Vikings who died usually while invading England! The language is Old Norse.

Later, in trips through Celtic lands, I became aware of the many cairns, humanly made stacked rock. **(CAIRN IMAGE)** They, too, were made to mark the spot – whether to serve as a landmark such as a pass or summit or commemorate something of significance. Just as ubiquitous are the stone circles that marked the place where tribal gatherings would take place. **(STONE CIRCLE IMAGE)**

The later Christian form is the Celtic high cross which was also inscribed, but instead with scenes and stories from the Bible **(HIGH CROSS IMAGE)**.

Here is the St. Matthew high cross at the Iona Abbey, just off the western coast of Scotland.

Stone statuary of a different sort – representing effigies of divinities is found on Easter Island. **(EASTER ISLAND IMAGE)**

In North America the great mound builders created structures that often served as burial places or ceremonial/symbolic markers of what was felt to be sacred space. **(MOUND IMAGE)**

It shouldn't surprise us that the Middle East is filled with the same, and I don't mean the later Greco-Roman statuary and buildings. I refer to the early tribal practice of marking the spot with the simplest of stacked stones – the material that was readily at hand. And that's what the story from Joshua this morning is all about.

Following the liberation of the Israelites from the tyranny of the Egyptians, after their long sojourn in the wilderness for forty years, they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

Moses died before they arrived, not living to see the promise for himself. It was Joshua who assumed the mantle of leadership to lead the people. As they crossed the Jordan River we are reminded of that earlier crossing of the Red Sea, fleeing from the Egyptians who were in hot pursuit. The Israelites crossed on dry land but the Egyptians, loaded with heavy armor, chariots and horses, were mired in the muck and perished. "Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," sang Miriam, accompanied by her own tambourine.

Israel once again crossed a body of water, this time the Jordan River, and that marked the end of their liminal transitional period, their wandering in the wilderness. There comes a time when we must cross over into the future; we have wandered long enough. Now is the time.

At this moment, the leader and warrior Joshua turns into ritual priest as he gives instructions. He asks for one man from each of the twelve tribes to pick a stone from the riverbed and haul it on his shoulder to the other side.

At Gilgal they stack those twelve stones into a marker, an altar, a cairn. And why? Joshua tells them: When your children ask, "What do these stones mean?" you will tell the story of how God delivered us.

Why stack the stones? For the generations that follow. These stones shall serve as a sign. You are to stack stones that give rise to a story.

I have just been reading *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Of course, this has been popularized in movie form. This Orwellian dystopia takes place in a post-apocalyptic time. A certain class of women exists to bring children into the world because one of the effects of the nuclear disaster was widespread infertility. Their lives are now carefully prescribed and controlled by the new totalitarian state.

In one scene, the central character, one of these handmaids, is carefully exploring her dorm-like room, trying to figure out who preceded her.

As she looks in one of the darkened corners she finds a few words etched in the tiniest of letters near the wall. The language is Latin. Translated into English it read: “Don’t let the bastards wear you down.”

She suddenly found herself in communion with a sister who went before, a sister who left a message of encouragement for whoever would follow. She is no longer alone.

What pile of stones did your ancestors leave for you? What story is revealed when you ask, “What means these stones?”

It might not be stones that they left. I could likely be something else.

Is it something like Statue of Liberty, the emblem that tells the story of who we are and what we are about to each new generation? Is it some memorial to a heroic cause? What epitaph has been enshrined in poetry, music, film, photos, or art?

What stones were left behind so that we can know who went before and what great thing the spirit did through them?

And what legacy of faith are we leaving for the generations who follow after us? What stones do we stack as a sign for those who come after? What delivery system of the story do we leave behind?

Before my grandmother died she compiled an autobiography of her life and distributed it to all of her children and grandchildren. It was the humble compilation of a very humble life. Her story would never be included in a great history of the world. But for all of us who knew and loved her, the story was a great gift, a legacy. And in that sense, at least, I think it is fair to say that the well-lived life can itself become a testimony of faith.

I believe that certain places become charmed and sacred by the events that transpire there. Perhaps this is only known in the eyes of the beholder, but I suspect that it is a lot more than that.

Certain places become, as the Celts have put it, “thin space.” There is only an electron thick membrane between the seen and the unseen, the world of passing time and timelessness, and the ordinary and extraordinary.

We enter that thin space by walking into the church where hundreds of souls were baptized, or standing before first nations petroglyphs in New Mexico, or standing on a spot where thousands lost their lives at once. These are the charmed and sacred spaces where, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote,

Earth’s crammed with heaven.  
And every common bush afire with God.  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Several years ago I was traveling in Kansas City and decided to stop by the place where my grandparents’ home stood in my childhood. For a time our family lived with them, in some transitional time between here and there.

As I drove up the street where I remember spending lazy summer evenings running after fireflies in the dusky light, I encountered not a neighborhood, but rather strip shopping centers; houses had been replaced by the kingdom of commerce.

I parked my car, got out and walked along in front of the stores to where I remember the house located. There was a gap between two buildings, an undeveloped patch of land that had escaped the stone and steel, and there, inbetween the newly constructed buildings, were the foundations of my grandparents’ home – the stone and block remnants of what once was.

As I walked the stones of the foundation the house rose up before me in my imagination. There was the unattached garage where our dog died after being hit by a car, the old well behind the house that had been capped off when city water finally came through, the large garden in the back and the terraced side yard beside the old double storm doors that led down to the cellar.

You see, the stones were speaking, telling their story, a hologram in my mind, and I could see the living room and the book shelf of Encyclopedia Britannica where my grandfather used to sit in the evenings, the kitchen where grandmother cooked down the rhubarb she cut with a paring knife by the back fence, the steep staircase that led up to the attic where we whiled away the hours playing monopoly.

What means these stones? These stones tell the story of what happened here and who it happened to. These stones carry a testimony of faith for all those who dare walk into story time, suspend their disbelief, and let the ordinary bush become afire with God.

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.