The Rock

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Built in 1859, the Citadel, otherwise known as Fort Alcatraz, has been a landmark in the San Francisco Bay for almost 160 years. Initially it was built as a military installation and it served function as a military camp and long term military prison. As the island continued to be developed throughout the remainder of the 19th century and into the 20th century a new need for the island arose, one I’m sure you’re familiar with. Alcatraz is arguably one of the best known prisons in United States history. Opening it’s doors in the early 30s, the Alcatraz prison held some of the most infamous and dangerous criminals until it closed in 1963. People like Al Capone, a national celebrity for his role in the wave of violence that swept through Chicago during prohibition, and George “Machine Gun Kelly”, whose kidnapping of Charles Urschel became the first major case solved by a brand new Federal Bureau of Investigation, roamed the halls of the prison they called “The Rock”. It certainly is a formidable structure, built on a crude island roughly 1.25 miles off the shore of San Francisco. Not just the concrete and steel of buildings, but the surrounding water itself provides an extra barrier through its strong currents, rough nature, and cold temperatures. It’s no wonder that, given its location, no successful escape attempts took place throughout it’s time as an operational federal prison. That doesn’t mean that people didn’t try. All told there were a total of 36 prisoners who made 14 escape attempts, with only 1 that could be considered moderately successful, given that there is enough evidence to suggest that three men may have possibly survived an escape attempt in 1962. But even with that possibility, it only adds to the mystique. It only adds to the legend and the lore surrounding it.

This island was called the rock because it was seen as an impenetrable. After all that is one of the properties of rocks. They are very hard to break apart and it takes a great deal of energy and effort to break it apart. In a way we call things that are constants in our lives our “rocks”. But why do we call these things our rocks? Why do we even use that term? Rock is steady, it is unmoving. In Chicago around the turn of the 20th century there became a new phenomena in architecture known as Skyscrapers. However this became a very unique challenge in Chicago. As you may or may not know, the soil in Chicago is very much like sand, and sand does not support a building very well as the building, especially one with the weight of a skyscraper, would sink into the earth. However, it also was far too costly to dig the depth necessary to drill into bedrock. So innovations were made and an architect by the name of John Root developed a floating raft system to build solid foundations so that buildings could overcome the soft, marshy soil. But all this goes to say, the ground has to be solid in order to build a foundation. In our lives we have many things that represent Alcatraz. Not from a prison mentality but from more of a “solid” perspective. I don’t think that it’s out of the realm of possibility that you may have something that you consider to be your own personal rock, your own personal source of strength. Growing up many of us consider our parents or siblings to be our rock, our constant source of support and love. When we grow older we find close friends that can serve in a similar capacity. Perhaps you have a poem or a short story, or a bible verse that you turn to in order to steady you when you feel unsettled. We all have these sorts of constants, these rocks, in our lives. They are the things that we depend on to keep us stable. Yet for many of us I imagine that we sometimes find ourselves balancing rather precariously on our rocks, as we look to keep ourselves together. As I said, firm footing is necessary in order for a foundation to be built. In areas where the soil is more fluid we don’t dig basements, rather we build on a poured slab, because you need solid footing in order to construct anything. That is true in both the physical aspect of our lives as well as the non-tangible side. The same can be said of any country or business. Typically countries are founded on a set of principals and ideals and if those are both good, then the country remains, building on the rock of its principles and ideals. Businesses all have to have a mission statement declaring what they hope to accomplish through their business. Also at the core of any business are basic strategies for growth and maintaining the business, the core principles that guide those who run the business.

The church is not that different. The only difference is the footing. You see we precariously balance on our own rocks to avoid being swept up. We balance on our own morals, we balance on our own actions, we balance ourselves based on our performance in the world. But the church, that ground, well there’s not much more than needs to be said than the words in our hymns this morning to describe the ground the church is on. Today our gospel lesson shows us a rather well known story, the confession of Peter. This is a truly important moment as it is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One of the things that they teach you first when you’re learning to study history is that often times, when multiple sources mention an event, especially in the ancient world, it is of vital importance. Now the one quote that we know from this instance, other than the confession of Peter of course, comes from the account in Matthew where Jesus says, “**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**” Now first and foremost I think it’s important to ask, is this quote talking about Peter as the foundation of the ministry, or Jesus as the foundation of Christian doctrine. Well I think both. I think that Peter’s actions and what we know of his life following this would indicate that Peter certainly would be considered a founding member of the Christian Church. And naturally Jesus is also speaking of himself. He is speaking of himself in the context of Peter’s confession. That is the rock that Jesus is speaking of. Because that is the rock on which the church is built. I think it is so neat that we can look at a statement like this and interpret it in different ways. As this statement was spoken, I’m certain that Peter understood it to be about himself. But as time went on, and has continued to go on, it is clear that this statement also refers to the confession that Peter made.

That is the solid footing that our church is built on. Naturally it would make sense for God to found His church upon himself. This confession, of Jesus as the Christ, is one that we make every week. It’s one that I bet we could do with our eyes closed. But it is so very vital to who we are as Christians. Jesus being the Christ means that God has fulfilled his promise of sending a savior to his people. It means that this promise, made to Abraham generations before, has been kept. That’s what it means in the past tense. In the future tense, this confession of Jesus as Christ means that we inherit the kingdom of God. It means that, as Paul says, we have been justified, made righteous. With Jesus as our Christ we have an advocate with God on our behalf, one who has given his life for us. With Jesus as our Christ it means that his death was not in vain, as he has saved the world from sin and death. This is the footing on which the church is founded. It is founded on Jesus. But not just the church, you also. For through your baptism, whenever that was, a new foundation was laid upon new footing. Through the Holy Spirit God has called you to be one of his chosen and he recognizes you as one of his children. You see we may feel as though our footing is precarious, but it is solid, it is firm, because our footing is in Jesus. That is what it means to be a new creation in Christ Jesus. Because the foundations found in this world are not on solid ground. We see the evidence of that all around us in the way that it seems our society is slowly falling apart. But in Christ we have a firm foundation, one that is unmoving and timeless. This foundation will not fall away, it will not crumble. It will not need to be rebuilt. It is upon this rock that Christ has built his church, and it is upon this rock, as his faithful people, that we stand together. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.