

11.8.2020 - 127 Hours (Matthew 18:7-20)

On April 26, 2003, Aron Ralston was hiking all alone in a remote section of eastern Utah called the Blue John Canyon. While he was descending through the canyon a boulder he climbed over fell, and when it came to rest it ended up crushing his right hand and pinning it against the canyon wall. Aron hadn't informed anyone of his hiking plans that day, and so it was certain that nobody would begin to search for him anytime soon.

With only 12 ounces of water and almost no food, he spent five days trying to free his hand from this offensive trap, but his efforts were futile. He couldn't free himself from the weight of the 800 pound boulder. After days of trying to lift and chip away at the stone, he decided that the only way out was to cut off his hand. He began to experiment with tourniquets and made some cuts to his forearm in the first few days, yet on the fourth day he realized that in order to free his hand he would have to cut through the bones in his arm. He had no tool to cut through bone.

Aron carved his name, date of birth and presumed date of death into the sandstone canyon wall and videotaped his last goodbye to his family. He didn't expect to survive the night, but when he woke up at dawn the next day, he made a final effort to free himself by using his body weight to violently bend his arm until it finally broke. Then after breaking the bones in his arm he began to amputate, cutting through skin, nerves, and tendons with the same dull blade that he'd used to carve his tombstone into the canyon wall. Covered in blood and missing a hand, but now a free man, he rappelled down a 65-foot sheer wall one-handed and hiked out of the Blue John Canyon after 127 excruciatingly painful hours.

Can you imagine? Can any of us imagine being in such a fight for our lives that we could not only leverage the weight of our body to break our arm, but use the dull blade of a multi-tool to cut off our own hand? It's incomprehensible, yet I would suggest, whether we realize it or not, we are in such a fight. We each face this type of decision every day and in our second lesson this morning Jesus made that truth perfectly clear. He stated: *"If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire"* (Matthew 18:8-9).

These are powerful words that we must carefully and prayerfully consider. This is not an example of a politician or a celebrity using shocking language to make headlines or to see what kind of reaction they can get on social media. This is the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and in this passage He isn't speaking to the multitudes – the saved and the unsaved – about two eternal destinations. He's speaking to His closest disciples, those He called friends (John 15:15) about heaven and hell. He's speaking about decisions that lead to life, and decisions that lead to death. Today we'll use the story of a man trapped by his own decisions to consider what Jesus is saying to His first disciples, as well as to us.

Aron Ralston is a trained and very experienced outdoorsman. He was the first person to climb all of Colorado's named peaks that are above 14,000 feet, alone and in the winter, and by the way, there are 59 of them! The hike he'd planned through Blue John Canyon was to him nothing more than a walk in the park in the month of April. He knew and had always practiced the rule of telling someone where you're going and when you'll return, but for this hike he thought, why bother? There was nothing to fear. Aron Ralston had no clue that he would soon be in a 127 hour fight for his life.

I wonder how often we, as Christians, have been fooled by the same kind of reckless thinking. St. Peter warns us, *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour”* (1 Peter 5:8), but instead of practicing such sober vigilance, instead of working out their salvation *“with fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), many Christians let down their guard, and allow the many distractions of this earthly life to shift their focus away from God's heavenly kingdom. We can't let the bedrock of our lives be the shifting sand of this world, because if we do, before we know it we'll end up trapped, pinned beneath the weight of the world, the flesh, and the devil. When we aren't vigilant, when we build our house upon the sand (Matthew 7:26), what started out as a walk in the park will quickly turn into a fight for our lives.

Aron Ralston found himself in such a physical fight for his life. His decision to approach this excursion into the remote wilderness as a walk in the park had led him to be trapped for days, and when you consider this story of survival day by day there's something you can't help but notice. It's unclear exactly when the moment happens, but there is without a doubt a moment that his hand becomes offensive. Think about this: Day one he realizes he's really trapped and there is no easy way out. Part of day one and day two are

spent trying to use his multi-tool to chip away at this rock. When this proves to be completely useless day three is spent using the weight of his body, in conjunction with the ropes and pulleys he has with him, to somehow move this 800 pound boulder. Then on day four he carves his tombstone. There's a moment over the course of these days when he looks down and realizes it's just a hand, and not only that, his hand is offensive. This trapped hand is the reason he's dying.

We heard Jesus say, "*Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!*" (Matthew 18:7). Sin is offensive. We all know it is, but all too often we are lured into the decision to go down that path, and it leaves us trapped under the weight of a deadly lie, because sin promises freedom, but it only brings slavery, sin promises success, but it only brings failure, sin promises life, but the Bible tells us that "*the wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23; John 8:34). We need to examine our own lives, and our own conscience daily, and where sin is recognized we must be offended at the sight of it. As we say concerning our sins in the Confession: "The remembrance of them is grievous unto us. The burden of them is intolerable." Sin is offensive, grievous, and intolerable because, as you know, "*sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned*" (Romans 5:12).

This thought brings us to our final point: We must choose life. Choosing life isn't easy and it's often very painful. We recognize that fact in the story we heard this morning about Aron Ralston, and all that he endured to choose life, to free himself from the weight of an 800 pound boulder, and it seems likely that Jesus used the horrifying analogy of cutting off your hand, cutting off your foot, or plucking out your eye because in His perfect humanity He knew how difficult, how excruciatingly painful it can be for us to cut sin out of our lives.

Aron Ralston didn't make it out of the Blue John Canyon with both of his hands, but he made it out alive. He decided it was better to cut off his offensive hand and live, rather than have two hands and die. By the grace of God, through faith in His only Son our Lord, we have the opportunity to make a similar decision: The decision to follow our Lord's command and cut sin out of our lives. Aron Ralston used the dull blade of a multi-tool, but we have been given something infinitely better: the Word of God. In the book of Hebrews we read that the Word of God is "*quick, and powerful, and sharper*

*than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow... ”* (Hebrews 4:12). The Truth of the Word of God, the same Word spoken in creation, the same Word that dwells in us, cuts through joints and marrow setting us free from the weight of sin. How often did Jesus say, *“Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven”* (Matthew 9:2). *“Go in peace... Your sins are forgiven”* (Luke 7:48, 50). In Christ we can be of good cheer, in Christ we can go in peace, because in Christ the struggle is over, for what we could never do, He has done for us. He has set us free, and if the Son has set you free, you are free indeed (John 8:36).