Memorial Stones.  When I was a child, my brother Bruce and I had a pet alligator named Ally.  When he died, we put Alli in a coffee can, my brother dug the hole in the back yard, we put the coffee can into the hole, I read from the Bible, and finally, we put a big stone over the grave.  The stone was to remind us of the great times we had with Alli.  I am sure you have done the same either with pets or human loved ones.  At cemetery and in other cemeteries, we put stones over gravesites to remind us of special people in our lives.  Every time we see that head stone, we are reminded of the person and the life they lived amongst us.  This weekend, our focus is mainly on those men and women who have given up their lives in service to our country.  These individuals put their life on the line so that we could continue to enjoy the wonderful freedoms we have here in the United States.  For example, in Washington D.C. there is a Vietnam War Memorial.  The memorial has the names of all the soldiers who gave up their lives for our country in the Vietnam War.

Where did Memorial Day have its starting point?  Well, in April 1863, in Columbus, Mississippi after decorating graves of her two sons who served during the Civil War as Confederate soldiers, an elderly woman also decorated two mounds at the corner of the cemetery.  An observer asked, "What are you doing?  Those are the graves of two Union soldiers."  The reply, "I know.  I also know that somewhere in the North, a mother or a young wife mourns for them as we do for ours."  That little band of ladies set in motion what became Memorial Day.

The custom of placing flowers on the graves of the war began on May 5, 1866 in Waterloo, New York, and Waterloo has been recognized by Congress as the official birthplace of Memorial Day.  In 1868, General John A. Logan, then president of the Grand Army of the Republic, declared that May 30 would be a day to "decorate with flowers the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion."  After World War I the day was set aside to honor all of the American wars, and the custom was extended to pay homage to deceased relatives and friends, both military and civilian.

We sometimes call Memorial Day, Decoration Day because we decorate the graves of fallen heroes with flags and flowers.  So on this Memorial Day Weekend, it is time for us to do some remembering, to Remember the Cost of Freedom.  Freedom is not free.  It comes at a great cost.

A Biblical story about a fight for freedom is found in the early history of our world.  God’s people had been held hostage for 450 years in the land of Egypt.  They were treated harshly as slaves.  Finally, oneday, the Lord raised up Moses to get his people out of Egypt and back to Palestine.  But Moses did an act of disobedience which cost him the chance to enter Palestine.  Moses struck a rock to get water out of it, instead of speaking to it as the Lord had directed.  As a result, Moses was told he would only see the Promised land from a distance, and Joshua would take God’s people into the land.  Well, the big day had arrived, only the Jordan River separated God’s people from the land of Palestine.  The priests led the way carrying the ark of the covenant, a box with the ten commandments in it, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s staff.  God made his presence felt from this ark.  It was like the visible presence of God on this earth.  As soon as the priests feet touched the water, the waters of the Jordan part.  The priests stopped in the middle of the riverbed.  Then, all of God’s people walk across the dry riverbed.  Once they are on the otherside, the Lord speaks to Joshua from the ark in the middle of the
River. The Lord tells Joshua to have 12 layman come by the ark and pick up 12 stones. They are to take these stones and pile them up by their camp that night. What was the purpose of these stones piled up in one location? These stones were a sign representing a marvelous event. These stones would serve as a springboard for parents to teach their children. They would be a lasting reminder of the Lord’s grace and power. God’s people would recall as they looked at these stones that the Lord was one who keeps his promises. The Lord told his people he would get them out of Egypt, told them they would enter Palestine again, told them, the Canaanites would be driven from the land, that Israel would inherit Palestine, and that a Savior would be born there. The Lord was someone they could count on. That was what they were to remember. Joshua wanted God’s people to always contemplate on the wonderful works of God.

So why is it we need to have memorials? First of all, because we tend to forget great things that have taken place in our past. I have an IPAD these days to help me remember where I should be. Also it helps me remember the names of people, so I won’t forget them. But the problem now is that I don’t remember where I put my IPAD. So as you see we are forgetful people. A memorial helps us to remember great events in history.

Let us take a moment to reflect upon the estimated casualties that have come from our country’s fight for freedom over the past two centuries: In the Revolutionary War 33,000 soldiers died; in the War of 1812 7,000 soldiers died; in the Mexican War 13,000 perished; during the Civil War 980,000 men died; in the Spanish-American War 4,000 died; in World War I 320,000 U.S. soldiers gave their lives; in World War II 1,078,000 died; in the Korean War 157,000 soldiers perished; during the Vietnam War 111,000 of our men died; in the Gulf War there were 700; and in the War in Iraq there have been nearly 600 deaths.

A total of these figures reveals that there have been an estimated 2,704,300 U.S. soldiers who have died over the past two centuries. When we think of those young men and women who gave up their lives for us, we are very sad. How difficult it must be for the families, to lose a child at such a young age. Whenever I do a funeral at Florida cemetery, or think of my childhood and my visit to Arlington National cemetery, I can still those rows of gravestones of soldiers who gave up their lives in the service to our country. Those gravestones remind me of what they accomplished. These soldiers protected our country from hostile enemies who only wanted to destroy our land and our people.

On Memorial Day, we remember the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf. Because of those sacrifices, we have freedom. We don’t have to worry about someone barging into our house and robbing us or killing us. We don’t have to worry about someone telling us that we can’t worship God anymore. We don’t have to worry about being thrown in jail for no reason. We are free from those sorts of things. But it came at a cost – people had to go to war, and shed their blood, for us. When you go to the theater, and watch a war movie these days, the movies are becoming more and more graphic. Saving Private Ryan, the Patriot were two of my favorite war movies. They showed how gory and bloody war is.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember more than just the graves at Arlington National cemetery. Rather, we remember the memorial of the cross. On that cross, the Son of God, shed his blood so that we could enjoy spiritual freedom.
You see, that sacrifice served as a ransom, and once that ransom was paid, you were freed from all kinds of things. No longer do you have to be afraid of God, because you know that Jesus has paid for your sins. No longer do you have to be afraid to die, because you know that you’ll be going to heaven when you die. No longer do you have to be tortured by guilt because of those sins of the past. No longer do you have to live in confusion about how to get to heaven. You are free from all those things. Free to live at peace with God, and at peace with yourself. But that freedom came at a price – the Son of God had to sacrifice himself for you, to shed his blood for you. And so, on this Memorial Day Weekend, we remember the ultimate combat soldier, Jesus Christ, and his death on the cross.

When the Allied forces defeated the Germans in WWII, thousands of prisoners were released. Thousands of people were given their freedom. Not one prisoner said, “No, I don’t believe the war is over. I will stay here in this prison until you prove to me that the war is over.”

When Jesus died on the cross, and then rose from the dead, billions of prisoners were freed. According to the Bible, every person in the world, for all time was freed from their guilt, from their fear, from the condemnation of hell. But not everyone believes it. A lot of people say, “That’s too good to be true. I will stay here in my prison of guilt until you prove to me that God really did win the war.” But for you, you do believe. You are like those prisoners of war, who see the allied troops opening the gates. Jesus has opened the gates of heaven to you. The war is over – Satan has lost – you are free from your sins, free to be a Christian who is loved and taken care of by God.

And you know, Jesus wants your life on this earth to be a memorial to others. He wants you to show others how God has brought you across the Jordan River. Point out where the stones are. Turn to a neighbor and say, “I remember when…” – then fill in the blank.

…I was only making $7/hour
…I was struggling to get my degree while my wife held down the fort at home
…I was making $7/hour

But every single time God was right there by my bedside, in my car seat, in my cubicle, in my kitchen, in my bathroom, wherever the river was about to overtake me, God dried up the river right before your eyes and kept it dry until you and your family went across. The truth of the matter is that God was working in your life, taking a mess and making it into a masterpiece.

Somewhere along the way he has turned your test into your testimony. He has turned your pain into your pride. He has turned your aches into your strength. You ought to point to the stones. That place in time, that moment in your past, that spot in your life, that spark that got you going, that time you knew she was it…point to the stones.

What will people remember you for? Live to be remembered for the important things. Live to be remembered for giving up your rights and your possessions for the benefit of others. Live for acts of kindness that lighten the load of those who are hurting and weary. Live to be remembered as one who loved Jesus and it really showed in your life. That is a memorial that will remain standing forever. Amen.