

Roots and Resurrection

Jeremiah 17:5-10

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

One of the most memorable vacations of my life was the one Jeff and I took to Yosemite National Park. If you haven't been to Yosemite, you have missed one of the best places on earth to encounter the grandeur of God's creation. About 10 million years ago, the Sierra Nevada pushed up and tilted westward, causing the formation of deep narrow canyons and massive granite outcrops that have been split into fantastic pillars and dome-shapes. It's a spectacular place to hike, and Jeff and I made our way along trails that I hope I will never forget. One hike took us up to the top of Sentinel Dome. Now the domes in Yosemite are huge, smooth granite outcrops, bulging their way high above the cliffs and the canyon floor far below.

When we were there, more than ten years ago now, we were privileged to see the wonder of Sentinel Dome still in place: a lone Jeffrey pine, thrusting forth through the granite where nothing else seemed to survive. High as it was, unsheltered from the winds and rains, this pine was twisted and gnarled and bent over sideways against the elements. It was photographed as far back as 1867, so we know it stood there for well over 130 years. Unfortunately, it was struck by lightning in the 1980s, and finally blew down in a storm in 2003. It was a famous tree, fascinating to all who saw it, because we knew it must have tapped into a water source that was invisible to the rest of us, and it must have had a deep strong root to anchor it in place against all the winds that buffeted and battered it for such a long, long time. The Jeffrey tree, rooted solidly and illogically in the granite, as solid and illogical as you are, rooted and grounded in the granite of your faith.

Please pray with me:

Almighty God, O Holy One, teach us what it means to live. Teach us what it means to die. Teach us what it means to hold fast in this world to a resurrection faith. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Do you ever ponder the fact that your Christian faith doesn't make much sense?

You may be startled to hear your pastor ask you that, but I'd like to suggest to you that if you have not confronted the vast illogic of your faith, the likelihood is high that you aren't very familiar with what you claim to believe. Someone once quipped that Christians are expected to believe at least 10 impossible things before breakfast. Well, I haven't had my breakfast yet this morning, so here's the biggie for us all to chew on: death is not the end of the story. Jesus was crucified. He died on Friday and they put him in the tomb, rolled the stone in place and sealed it shut And then on Sunday, there he was, full of life, walking and talking and eating fish with his disciples! Illogical, unbelievable, inconceivable. And there's more: the promise for us to grasp this morning is if Jesus rose from the dead, you too shall rise from the dead. Out of the grave, out of the tomb, out of the crypt into which you will fall. Death is not the end of the story. You shall live again.

Now, perhaps this idea of your own resurrection is not very clear to you, or perhaps not even very important. Sometimes we have a rather narrow view of just what it means—seeing at as simply a guarantee of our own personal immortality. And some are even saying—as they did in Paul's day—that the resurrection never happened and we die just as nature dies. Rational folks, who scoff at our childish beliefs, and who never could turn and become like little children in their trust, in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

After all, it seems illogical to us, doesn't it? We have waited at the deathbeds, we have stood by the gravesites, we know—we know—we absolutely know—they are gone, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. How does our outrageous faith dare to claim that what appears to all eyes to be the rocky outcrop of death is in fact the toe-hold of the tree of life? And yet, here it is for you this Sunday morning: this nonsense—this foolishness!—this stumbling block to the wise—the essence, the crux, the central tenet of our faith. For if the dead are not raised from the grave, then Jesus Christ is not raised from the grave. And if Jesus Christ is not raised from the grave, then our faith is in vain, and our hopes are empty.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier¹ points out that "if Christ is not raised from the dead, there is no Christian Gospel, no Easter good news, there is nothing more to this world than that jungle out there on our city streets. Without that victory, evil and violence and vulgarity are just going to have their way, until they slowly destroy all that is lovely and pure and innocent, and society comes crashing down around the heads of our children and grandchildren. If Christ is not raised from the dead, if people cannot be assured of that, then there remains nothing but the conviction that the Pilates and Herods of this world have won, so we'd better get busy looking out for number one. If life is to the ruthless and strong, then never mind who gets hurt in the scramble. It is the guy who is shrewd and knows how to take care of himself who is going to survive the battle. Jesus loved people, someone could reason, but look what it got him; nailed to a cross for his compassion. Let's not make the same mistake and end up poor and dead."

Eat, drink and be merry, y'all, for tomorrow it's over. The end. And *this* logic - well, *this* is the logic the world wants to sell you.

Centuries before Paul, the prophet Jeremiah was trying to point out that relying on our own understanding is a curse that cannot sustain us, and those who trust in human wisdom are tumbleweeds, rootless and bustling along here and there blown before every wind and breeze, dry and desiccated, crumbling apart as they roll along, with nothing to ground them, nothing to nourish them. In contrast, Jeremiah offers us the picture of those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, that shall not be afraid in the heat, and shall stay green in the dry times, never anxious, and never ceasing to bear fruit. The planted, rooted, greening ones are those whose trust is the Lord. Those who rely not on their own understanding, but live into the illogical, the demanding, the amazing resurrection promise of our faith, drinking deeply of the still, unfathomable depths of God's Living Water.

You know, that Jeffrey Pine on top of Sentinel Dome in Yosemite was anchored by a huge gnarled twisted root that disappeared into the granite to drink from a source that was invisible and inconceivable—just as our faith compels us to rely wholly and completely on what is unlikely, unreasonable, unanticipated, unseen. As children of the Enlightenment, we value empirical data; we want to know we're investing in a sure thing. But the Word reminds us this morning that what the world knows to be certain is usually not, and what we perceive to be real and worthy of our trust is not as certain as the unseen truth of God.

So here we are, we Christians, planted, rooted, on the rock of our faith, unlikely people—resurrection people—drinking from a source that the world cannot see. We make a big deal about the comfort of our faith, but truly embracing it can be downright scary. For a resurrection faith is not an intellectual assent of reason. A resurrection faith means being seized by a life giving force that rocks our world and shatters what appears to be reality. A resurrection faith demands that we die to the what the world says is true, die to what our egos want to do, die to self, so that we may experience the Easter faith today, risen to new life now. Resurrection people are pushed out beyond what is comfortable, safe and reasonable, into a death-defying, life-affirming place where the first day of a new creation is ours today.

What does this resurrection faith look like? Well, it's all around you: Resurrection faith is in heart of the comfortable, retired couple who befriended a man in prison with letters and packages, until his parole, when they took him into their home. Resurrection faith is in the integrity of the farmer who rejects mass-production technologies of pesticides and antibiotics to develop a productive, greening, organic farm. Resurrection faith is in the hope of the laid-off auto-worker who considers what new vocation might be calling to him now. Resurrection faith is in the determination and courage of those among us who care for others with crippling diseases. Resurrection faith is in the imagination of friends who are stepping out of their own comfort zones to start a non-profit business to benefit the underprivileged. Resurrection faith is in the forgiveness and reconciliation of people who have wronged one another. Resurrection faith is in the love of bereaved parents who moved through the desolation of their own grief to begin a support ministry for others.

Resurrection faith is in the life of this family who have brought their son to be baptized, named and claimed by a loving God. Resurrection faith is in the time and energy of those going down on your behalf to share the Good News with our brothers and sisters in Mexico. Resurrection faith, my friends, is the power to change the world.

Reasonable? No, none of this is reasonable. But if we rely on what the world believes to be reason, we too will be the rootless, thirsty tumbleweeds, tossed about by whichever new breeze is blowing.

Jesus Christ offers us an alternative; a resurrection faith that empowers us to make bold, life-affirming choices, because we know that there is life beyond death, and that God is just and merciful, and that the forces that seem to overwhelm people, whatever they may be, will not finally triumph. Because our trust is in the Lord, because our trust is the Lord, we are rooted to the rock, drinking deeply from the living water. Even so, Lord Jesus, Come! Amen.

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier "The Christian Center." Day One, April 20, 1993