

Cultivating Faith
Mark 16:1-8
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Easter Sunday, 2018
Pastor Marianne Cotter

Cultivating faith. That's is our theme today. How **does** faith grow? Is it God's work? Is it something we do? Or is it both?

Today, on Easter, we cultivate resurrection faith. The pivot point – the center around which Christianity turns -- is faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." (1 Corinthians 15:19-20)

The good news is the seed of resurrection faith has already been planted in you. the Holy Spirit is already working in you giving you confidence that Christ was raised from the dead. I know this because you are here this morning in Christ's body, the church, where the Holy Spirit is present. The seed of resurrection faith has been planted by the Spirit. But how is faith **cultivated**? How does it **grow**? In the next few minutes I'm going give you an answer, and end with a challenge. If you want resurrection faith to grow, you need to work with God. To understand all this, lets look again at this morning's scriptures.

In the gospel of Mark, the Easter story is different from Matthew, Luke and John. In those gospels, people meet the risen Christ. In Mark the women who come to anoint Jesus' body meet only a man in a white robe who tells them Jesus is not here, that he has been raised. Then the angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." The gospel of Mark ends with the terrified women fleeing the tomb. Later, other endings were added to Mark but in the original version there were no resurrection appearances of Jesus. Just an empty tomb, which taken alone proves **nothing** about the resurrection.

These women eventually overcame their fear. They did tell others what they'd heard and seen (otherwise Mark's gospel never would have been written. Here's how I believe the women's fear became faith. Jesus had planted the seed of faith long before that Easter morning. The disciples (both women and men) had been given a vision of the risen Christ in the transfiguration. He appears exalted in heaven along with Moses and Elijah. This is Mark's glimpse of the resurrection. It is given to three disciples, who I believe they shared with the others, including the women. Later, in Mark chapters eight, nine and ten, Jesus tells his disciples he will be betrayed, arrested, put on trial, killed and will rise again on the third day. In chapter fourteen right before Jesus predicts Peter's denial, Jesus says "but after I am raised up, I will

go before you to Galilee.” For the women at the tomb, fear became resurrection faith as they went back over in their minds all that Jesus had told them. They realized His word could be trusted. Things happened as Jesus said they would. So, the first way resurrection faith grows is by listening to – and believing – what Jesus says. It’s going over in our minds what we have learned about him, what he taught and said.

The second way we cultivate resurrection faith is listening to stories people tell about the risen Christ. That’s what our reading from 1 Corinthians 15 was about today. Paul never met Jesus when he was alive on earth. The seed of Paul’s resurrection faith was planted during a personal encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul says he was the least worthy person to receive the gift of such a vision. Paul had been a persecutor of the church. But by the grace of God, Paul is now part of the church he once tried to destroy. He is now telling stories about the risen Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 he writes “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,⁵and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve.⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.” First Corinthians fifteen -- is one of the most detailed description of what resurrection looks like in the Bible. That chapter is still helping grow resurrection faith. It was written by someone whose story of meeting the risen Christ grows faith in others.

Here’s what we know so far about how resurrection faith grows. the Holy Spirit plants the seed of this faith in us. Seeds need soil to grow. Each person is like the soil in which the seed of faith grows. For seeds to sprout in the dark soil, they need warmth. Resurrection faith grows as we feel the warmth of Jesus’ presence: his life, his teachings, in the Bible and in each other in the church. These begins to work in our hearts and that faith seed sprouts. The more time we spend with Jesus – in the church, in study, in holy conversation, among other followers – the more likely that seed of faith will keep growing. Next seeds need water. The stories of encounters with the risen Christ also help the seed of our faith grow. These stories are contained in what we call” This accumulated wisdom of those who have gone before us – what we call “church tradition -- is like the water needed for seeds planted in the ground to grow. We are refreshed, made more alive and better able to stretch and grow because of these stories.

Soil. Warmth. Water. There’s one more thing seeds need to grow: time. How long will it take for the seed to poke up through the soil and become a plant, a vine, a tree? We don’t know. There’s always an element of mystery when it comes to growing things. **When** will the growth come? There’s always an element of mystery cultivating resurrection faith. When will we see evidence of what we believe to be true? We can only wait. We can only trust. And that is the work we must do.

The book of Proverbs helps us here. Proverbs is a book in the Bible dedicated to the kind of wisdom that will make us truly happy, truly satisfied in a spiritual sense. Today we heard Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths." Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not rely on your own insight. Looks can be deceiving. Proverbs 3:7 says "Do not be wise in your own eyes;...." When we are wise in our own eyes we don't trust in God as much as we trust in our plans, in our strength, in people we know, in our sense of being powerful. True wisdom, said John Wesley, is knowing our purpose in life is to enjoy God now and in eternity. That is human happiness. And that is found only in a relationship with God, based on trust so total it's seen in all we do. One of Wesley's favorite scriptures was Galatians 5:6 "the only thing that counts is faith working through love." My paraphrase is: the only thing that counts is trusting God and doing loving works."

The third way that resurrection faith grows is when we not only trust but we act on what we believe to be true. Think of it this way: A naturalist hands you an acorn. She says "planted under the right conditions, this will one day become a mighty oak tree." It's hard to see how that would happen but you go ahead and plant the acorn anyway. A salesperson at the garden store hands you a shriveled, dried up lump. He tells you: "planted under the right conditions, this bulb will become a beautiful flower, a tulip." It's hard to see how something so ugly will become a thing of beauty but you go out and dig up the ground and plant it anyway.

Or, you walk through a nursing home, past old, misshapen bodies and frail minds in wheelchairs. At first glance all you see is sadness, loss, hopelessness. But then you stop. The person in this wheelchair is your loved one. Your eyes meet. And you both smile. A look of recognition and love is exchanged. And the words of 1 Corinthians 15:53 come back to you: "For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. And you know that, through faith, there's a resurrection body that awaits that your loved one in the future To trust with your whole heart means to take that acorn, to take that bulb, to plant them in the ground and watch for them to grow. It is to trust with your whole heart means to treat that frail, diminished heart/soul/mind/strength of your beloved one the beautiful person of faith, hope and love they will become when he/she meets God face to face. And treat that person like that is true. And to the extent that you are able, you treat all those other people in all those other wheelchairs the same way too.

So, where does resurrection faith grow. It grows with the warmth of the love of Jesus – from hearing his Word. It grows as we listen, again, to stories of those who have seen/felt/heard/sensed the presence of the risen Christ. It grows as we learn to trust in God with our whole hearts. The kind of trusting that involves taking action based on what we believe to be true. So now here's my challenge: Please take out the insert in our bulletin. It says "Cultivating Faith" with a cross shaped

piece of paper. The paper is embedded with flower seeds. You can take this piece of paper home and just leave it on the counter. And the seeds won't grow. But if you do what it says – soak it overnight; tear it up and plant it under some soil. Water it every day. In time the seeds will grow. It's up to you whether you will cultivate these seeds or not.

As you hold this paper in your hand, I want you to think about your own resurrection faith right now. As you hold this paper, think about how God has planted the seed in you..... Think about the people, the faith communities, the relatives, the friends who God used to plant faith in you. Think about the love of Jesus Christ our savior which is warming you right now, just like seeds need warmth to grow. Think about we are refreshed by the Living Word -- the Bible -- and the stories of the faithful who have gone before us. All of these nurture and sustain us. Think about how the Holy Spirit is working in us right now. And how the risen Christ will be made known to us as we celebrate Communion today.

Fear turned to faith for the women at the tomb. Paul's faith became resurrection faith as he chose to believe and obey the voice of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. As we choose trust in the LORD with our whole heart, our resurrection faith keeps growing our whole lives long. We find ourselves waiting, watching for the beautiful things that God will reveal in the time to come. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our LORD Jesus Christ. Amen.