

Rising with Christ

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Mary Koon

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John 12:20–33

Spring officially begins this weekend. I love the spring even with its cruel teasing... one day you can warm your face in the sunshine and squish in the soft mud, and the next, we find ourselves under a blanket of snow. Perhaps at this point you allow your mind to drift toward seed catalogs or have started pruning your bushes. There is something magical about clearing away the dead leaves in a flower bed and seeing the tiniest green hasta shoot or daffodil poking out beneath the mud. Just when you thought it would never happen, spring arrives.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus teaches about his death and resurrection, discipleship and the church using an agricultural metaphor. Today's is a power-packed bit of scripture from the gospel of John that takes place during the final week of Jesus' earthy life and things are heating up in Jerusalem. The scene today takes place after Jesus' brief years teaching, preaching and doing miracles and less than a week after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the donkey.

I will be reading John 12:20–33 from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*. Listen to how God may be speaking to you through the scripture this morning.

²⁰⁻²¹ There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: "Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?"

²²⁻²³ Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus.

Jesus answered, “Time’s up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

²⁴⁻²⁵ “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

²⁶ “If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

²⁷⁻²⁸ “Right now I am shaken. And what am I going to say? ‘Father, get me out of this’? No, this is why I came in the first place. I’ll say, ‘Father, put your glory on display.’”

A voice came out of the sky: “I have glorified it, and I’ll glorify it again.”

²⁹ The listening crowd said, “Thunder!”

Others said, “An angel spoke to him!”

³⁰⁻³³ Jesus said, “The voice didn’t come for me but for you. At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me.” He put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death.

So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.
AMEN.

Our text begins with a curious little story about Greeks coming to Jesus. This scene is only found in John's gospel. It wouldn't have been unusual to find Greek people in Jerusalem, they may have been travelers, traders, or may have been Jewish converts. In those days, the Greek people were known to be seekers of truth, and at this point Jesus probably had a reputation as a wise teacher (not too long before he raised Lazarus from death). One commentary I read suggested that maybe these folks were even in the temple when Jesus flipped the tables. We'll never know.

And why go to Philip and not straight to Jesus? Maybe they approached Philip first because he had a Greek sounding name and they felt more comfortable that way. Again, we will never know. But Philip then turns to Andrew who goes to Jesus and these travelers presumably become part of the crowd for Jesus' last public discourse. Perhaps John added this story as yet another way of showing that Jesus' gospel message is for the whole world or illustrating the point that people will continue to gather around the risen Christ.

I got hung up on this little scene this week. As we continue to journey through the wilderness of Lent, this brief encounter challenged me to explore how willing and ready I am to go out of my way to see Jesus in unexpected places. A little rabbit hole...

Back to the scripture.

Tension is building in Jerusalem and Jesus declares that the time is now. God is on the move, no more waiting. Something new is about to happen. In Jesus God will strip us of the worldly illusion of power through violence and coercion and replace it with justice and freedom symbolized by an empty cross.

In Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection, the false narrative of violence as redemption is finished. Peterson says, "Satan will be thrown out." Again, Jesus confounds the disciples' expectations and turns the world upside down.

Jesus illustrates the power of his death and resurrection, this process of dying and rising and multiplying with a farmer and her wheat.

Even those of us with a brown thumb can relate to this!

One winter, we moved into a house that was formally owned by an avid gardener. The yard looked dead and lifeless, until spring came, and then each week brought a new delight. A purple Iris here, a pink azalea there; it was a bounty.

So this grain of wheat, deeply nestled in the dark and quiet earth, dead to anyone who happens to cast a glance as they walk by, now bursts through the ground to reproduce itself many times over, or as the NRSV says, "bears much fruit." When John uses the term "fruit bearing", he does so to represent vision Gospel community, those following Jesus and bearing Christ's love in the world.

What holy irony, the empire who killed Jesus thought they put him in the grave, but they really planted a seed that sprouted new life and destroyed the chains of death. The seed produced and continues to produce new community, new ways of living, of bearing fruit as it breaks all human boundaries. In Christ, Jew and Greek, male and female, black and white, rich and poor, weak and strong are one. What looked like the end was actually a powerful beginning.

Then Jesus tells us what it means to be disciples, another holy paradox. To truly find life, we must lose it. In order to be re-born, we must die to our old selves, habits of self-comfort and self-centeredness, old patterns of thinking and living that bind and constrict and limit. We must die to

the illusion that we are somehow disconnected to one another, the earth and God in order to know the truth that God's creation lives in mutuality and interdependence with all the living and the divine.

Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words this way (anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life). But, if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. The end of one thing is the birth of something new.

Friends, we live in a world that is anxious and fear-filled, discouraged and hungry for a word of compassion and love. Children fleeing dangerous countries, hoping to find refuge and compassion are entering our southern borders in droves. White supremacy is a part of our institutions and violence against Asian people is on the rise. The pandemic continues to wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods.

Yet, this last year we have seen that from tragedy, we can rise up on the wings of love. Since last March we have born witness to global expressions of love and protest in the face of cruelty, oppression, and systemic inequality. We have seen a rise in political engagement in the shadow of those who want to thwart democracy. In sorrows great and small we have experienced acts of tenderness and connection and huge generosity. In Christ, we can have the confidence to live and proclaim that if love isn't winning, the story isn't over yet.

It takes courage to keep on loving boldly and recklessly. It can be scary and uncomfortable but Christ does not promise us comfort or a problem-free life. Christ promises his presence and has given us community.

It's easier to be brave knowing that others are beside us. If one grows tired or discouraged, others are there to lift the body up until you are on your feet again. We need one another.

Jesus asks only that we follow him. He will lead us where he goes, to the margins, to the places where there is suffering and loss and where hope is needed. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of this kind of bold faith and he says he'll be where we are, and God will be there, too.

Jesus hints here to the mutuality he will later describe at the last supper with his disciples when he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me, and I will abide in you. When one weeps, we all weep, when one rejoices, we all rejoice, we are interconnected in the web of life."

Last spring I saw a little story that has been on my mind for a year now. It comes from a person named Karen Caron.

By Karen Caron 3/24/19 <https://www.facebook.com/ken.lyon.332>

There was a farmer who grew excellent quality wheat and every season he won the award for the best grown in his county. One year a reporter from the local newspaper interviewed the farmer and learned that each Spring the man shared his seed with his neighbors so that they too could plant it in their fields...

"How can you afford to share your best wheat seed with your neighbors when they are entering their crops in the competition with yours?" the reporter asked...

"Why that's very simple," the farmer explained... "The wind picks up pollen from the developing wheat and carries it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior wheat, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of all the wheat, including mine. If I am to grow good wheat, I must help my neighbors grow good wheat"...

The reporter realized how the farmer's explanation also applied to peoples' lives in the most fundamental way... Those who want to live meaningfully and well must help enrich the lives of others, for the value

of a life is measured by the lives it touches. And those who choose to be happy must help others find happiness, for the welfare of each is bound up with the welfare of all...

As we journey together through these final wilderness days of Lent, may we trust in the promises of Jesus, that by letting go, we will rise with Christ and bear much fruit.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. AMEN.