

March 29, 2009  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
John 12:20-33  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

## ***EARTHBOUND***

Folk wisdom would tell us: Look up, look on the bright side. But on this Lenten Sunday Jesus' words invite us to look down, to look at the earth. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

There is a wintry feel to the weekend. But in recent days you can see shoots coming up through the ground. A few crocuses have shown their faces and a few blossoms and buds on the trees promise even more to come. It's a miracle, this yearly resurrection, this rebirth of nature we call spring. We earth-creatures can miss it, though, when we are attached to computers and cell phones, or our minds overwhelmed by pressure and stress.

Don't forget to look down. Feel your feet on the earth. Before resurrection there is death. As we heard on Ash Wednesday, we are dust. We are earth.

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. St. Francis' famous words suggest life after death in the literal sense. But is this mystery also about our everyday lives? St. Paul and Martin Luther would remind us that we die daily to sin that we may rise to new life. Could that be the kind of detachment Jesus talks about when he says that to follow him is to lose our lives in order to find them? How easy to forget that we are earthbound. That we are not the center of the universe. That the path to fulfillment isn't found through simply looking up, avoiding suffering, ignoring our human nature, being in denial about death itself.

Look down. Look to the earth. The seed is a mystery. It has wisdom to impart. Lessons for us to learn. And gifts to give.

Sometimes the gifts are rather surprising. A couple weeks ago I noticed a sprout growing out of my sink! It seems a few beans had remained lodged in the drain after I made bean soup. And to my surprise they sprouted! You could question my cleaning habits, but who would have expected to see new life coming out of such a grungy place?

And it got me thinking about one of our first science experiments: planting beans in dixie cups. So on Wednesday I decided to get my hands in a little dirt. And do my own little science experiment. I put one cup in the dark basement. I put one cup in the choir loft. I put a couple cups in a window, one with water and the other without ... And the result: I guess I should stick to drain! (someone later tells me it takes 10 days)

What really happens when a seed dies? One pastor decided to do research on this question for his sermon on this text. He first called a seed company and said: "I'm working on a sermon about seeds and you are experts on seeds. I read in the Bible that Jesus said when a seed dies it bears much fruit. Can you tell me what happens when a seed dies?" After a long pause the clerk said, "I think you need to talk to my boss." After the boss tried unsuccessfully to answer the question, he said: "Why don't you call a Ph.D. in plant physiology at the university." I guess when you're that smart you will have an answer about what happens when a seed dies. The professor said every seed is an embryo and in that embryo is a root which goes down into the ground, and a shoot that goes up into the sky. And in that little embryo there is an "on" and "off" switch. Amazing! So if you plant a seed into the ground at 40 degrees for 40 days the mechanism goes on, but if the temperature is 20 degrees, it stays off. There is a thin coat around the seed that protects the oxygen from coming in prematurely. When the dormant seed is planted into the ground, for 40 days at 40 degrees, the switch goes "on" and the seed takes in water and it miraculously begins to expand, and the seed coat is broken and it begins to bear fruit. And that's what happens when a seed dies, the professor said. It's a miracle.

You have to bury a seed. The seed goes down into the cold, dark earth. I may have buried several beans a few days ago but I remember burying tulip bulbs years ago. I did the burying in the fall as the weather was turning cold. But miracle of miracle, after a long Minnesota winter, when spring finally came the shoots popped through the ground.

We say that we are buried with Christ in baptism. That's why immersion is such a powerful symbol. We go down into the water. We die. We are buried. That we may come forth reborn. At the Easter Vigil we will gather around six persons of

our community, four adults and two infants. There will be a burial of sorts. A burial of one way of life and a taking on of another. A going down and coming forth. A death and a birth.

The seed is buried. Christ was buried. We are buried in baptism. The mystery of faith: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

The same mystery is true for our lives: the way to new life, the path to resurrection, the road to transformation, is through dying. It is a miracle so profound that I don't know how to say it. I've seen it in my own life and in the lives of others. Maybe this truth will look different to us, depending on our age, context, life situation.

Maybe we are the seed when we learn more and more how to let go. To surrender. To give up control.

Maybe we are the seed when we look earthbound and remember what and who we are. And what and who God is.

Maybe we are the seed when we lose our lives for the sake of another. When we sacrifice our ego, our selfishness, our needs, for the sake of the neighbor, the poor, the needy, the marriage, the friend, the other.

Maybe we are the seed when we are able to look at our losses, our heartbreaks, our tears, our vulnerabilities and see in them the beginning of resurrection and new life.

Maybe we are the seed when we are buried with Christ, not knowing how the future will unfold, but trusting the promise of the spring.

Days from now, on Good Friday, we will look up and see the tree of the cross, budding with new life. Lifted up from the earth the crucified One draws all the world to himself. This very day he draws us to himself as well. Seeds harvested to become bread broken for us. Grapes trampled to become our spiritual drink.

It is a miracle, this seed. Baptism is a miracle. You are a miracle.

And as we get ever closer to Easter, our wintry hearts come alive as we look down and see the miracle of spring: green shoots coming out of the earth.