



“Remember Who You Are”

1 Peter 2:2-10

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

The pear trees on Hicks Street are in full bloom. The Japanese cherry trees are bursting into bloom. The great magnolia tree in Beecher Garden is, as always, a sight to behold. Yesterday, all over town backyard gardeners prepared for summer. Spring has sprung!

Spring's promise of new life and beauty is upon us. Spring is nature's annual reminder that despite appearances, the death and decay of winter – dull Atlantic gray for us – is temporary. Life wins every year.

It's also true that much of the power of our experience of spring comes from its opposite, winter. The deeper and longer the winter, the greater our joyous experience of spring. The ancient and annual competition between cold and warm, winter and spring, stirs the soul.

I witnessed the clash of winter and spring last week in southern Ohio. Gloria and I were on the old family property to visit and do some spring preparation of the land. Yellow forsythia bloomed at the edge of the lake and the woods. The red bud were ready to bloom. Pale green new leaves poked their heads through buds, and the dogwood will surely follow. Two competing families of geese lay eggs on the point of the lake. The tractor is up and running, and the lawn service showed up for the first cutting.

I spent too little time beating back the brush that seems to close in on the house annually. I burnt brush cut down last year – and discovered poison ivy is potent even after a year of death!

Yet in the midst of new life and its spring promise we had to cut down the old maple tree Gloria planted as a child. The great tree that provided shade for four generations must give way to the inevitable. Over the past few years the old tree hollowed out and was hanging dangerously over the house. Decay accompanies the renewal of the earth. Gloria's 90-year-old father suffered a health crisis, was hospitalized, and came home where he wants to die. He told me several times before the crisis that he's lived too long now and wants to die in his chair looking out the window at the property that's been in his family for a century and a half. Once a powerful man, a leader, vigorous businessman and successful builder, he is fading away. Meanwhile out on the front porch I sat on the swing with my grand niece -- young, energetic, curious, her whole life in front of her.

The ritual competition of winter and spring bears witness to a larger truth. All life is a cycle of birth moving toward death. Life springs forth and moves inevitably toward decay. It's sad but normal. And when that cycle of life is interrupted, when a child's death precedes a parent's, the grief is beyond description.

Our morning texts, taken together, speak of those competing values. John 14 records Jesus' promise to prepare "a place" for us, a place where death and decay are no more, where God's Shalom triumphs, where eternal life is the norm. Acts 7 tells the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. John's theme is God's abundant life established in human lives. 1 Peter 2 is part of a letter to Christians who are suffering for their faith. The gospel is God's promise of good news for all. The narrative of this world seems to be unending bad news.

This week I heard from a woman in my former congregation in Minneapolis. Several years ago, she decided to leave a promising career in business to train for the Christian ministry. I am privileged to be part of her spiritual and pastoral formation. She's finished seminary and asked if I would write a recommendation for a pastoral position she's pursuing.

I think I've told you about Jeanne before. When I first knew her she was a newlywed who lost her husband to death after three months of marriage. "This isn't what I signed up for," she told me.

Faith is learning to live with ambiguity. Faith is the experience of the competing values of life and death, God's promise and human reality.

The very foundation of the biblical narrative is hope. Scripture declares that this world is not what God intends it to be. Humanity ran itself off the rails long, long ago. Yet our story also declares that the world (and we) can be better – will be better. The Christian story begins with God's decisive intrusion into human life when Jesus Christ inaugurated God's repair of God's broken world. In Christ, God's life, new life, entered into this world of death and destruction. Faith affirms that Easter triumphs over death in all its forms.

Take, for example, one small part of the Christian message. "Mercy triumphs over judgment." Imagine that! Imagine a world in which revenge, the old "eye for an eye" standard of justice is overturned, and mercy triumphs every time.

Faith is living under that mighty claim of God on our lives and adjusting ourselves to a new way of being and living.

Sadly, our best efforts and the best intentions of church and state fall short. The world remains a brutish place "red in tooth and claw," where the fittest survive, the strong prevail and, as a consequence, too often the weak, the poor, and the innocent suffer.

The late writer Kurt Vonnegut was a famous agnostic. What is not so well known is that Vonnegut called himself a "Christ-worshipping agnostic." In 1999 he published a book of essays titled *Palm Sunday*. In it he wrote:

If Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I'd just as soon be a rattlesnake....I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by – and then we will have two good ideas.

And through all the days of our lives in this unmerciful world, death stalks us. We all learn about death and/or come to terms with death in our own ways. I learned the difficult lesson of mortality too soon.

The summer between my sophomore and junior years in college, I lost four friends to death. Four young adults, full of promise with all of life ahead of them suddenly lost gone, forever. Bobby, a friend from school and church, died of a brain tumor. Pat and Ayo were killed in automobile accidents. Polly, a college friend, athlete and lifeguard,

drowned. I've never been quite the same. I suspect that summer affected my spiritual formation in ways beyond my understanding.

Faith is learning to live with ambiguity. On the one hand, we are people of hope in God's promise to make us and our world different. On the other hand, the world doesn't seem to change much from generation to generation. We live "in the meantime" between what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ and the completion of God's new creation. Living in the meantime is difficult and ambiguous.

Peter wrote a pastoral letter to young Christians living in the meantime. They knew the contradiction of life and death. They'd heard God's good news of a new life and experienced the excitement of a new community of people being reborn. They also experienced the sting of persecution. Peter calls it a "fiery trial."

Peter wrote the letter in part to tell that little community how to live in the meantime of ambiguity. His answer is no philosophical explanation of suffering or a defense of God in the midst of suffering. He doesn't offer a self-help program of steps toward resolving the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of faith.

His pastoral solution is rather simple. He told them, "Remember who you are."

In my early adolescence my family moved to blue collar, industrial, gritty Dayton, Ohio. Our neighborhood and my school reflected the character of Dayton. My high school was a tough place with gangs and a distinct anti-intellectual character. I adapted too easily to my environment.

My parents worried about me and offered to send me to a private school. "We see leadership potential in you that is not being met," is the way my Dad put it. That was a nice way of saying I was getting pretty messed up at Belmont High School.

I gladly escaped my environment and set off to a little Baptist school in the mountains of West Virginia. To my surprise I discovered that I was smart. I also became a leader. My teachers saw potential in me and set out to make me bloom. The Headmaster paid special attention to me. I became somebody. My intellectual life and my spiritual life blossomed in a new and healthier environment. For the first time in my life, I expected to succeed.

Our commencement speaker captured the moment well. His address was titled, "Remember Who You Are." He reminded us how we'd been shaped by this very special place. He encouraged us never to forget what we'd become in the hands of our teachers. I've never forgotten. I am grateful.

Peter reminds the congregation that they'd entered into a new environment that was reshaping their lives. "Believe it or not," he tells them, "You are priests of almighty God. You are God's chosen people. You are God's holy nation."

Then he adds the clincher. "You are God's household. God's family." It's a daring metaphor when you think about it. We, the people of God, are God's family. St. Paul adds his own daring metaphors. A local congregation, Paul writes, is a temple of God. We are the residence of almighty God! Paul adds, congregations are the Body of Christ! We embody the person, character, norms, and values of Christ. Amazing. Remember who you are, Peter writes.

Peter adds an even more daring metaphor. As God's children, drink the pure milk of the word. Grow by feeding on God. The early church understood this metaphor better than we. Back then, before the female breast was commercialized and eroticized, early Christian art and literature portrays God with breasts. The people of God, God's family is nourished at the breasts of God.

To be a Christian congregation is to meet and experience Jesus Christ “in” the community. The dynamic that makes the church the church is the living Christ among us. To become a church or to enter a church is a daring leap of faith. We believe, as Jesus taught us, “where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am with you.”

I took that leap of faith back in 1970. I became a Christian pastor. I didn’t want to. The spirit of the age argued against entering the ministry. Loud voices on the left and the right declared that the church had had it. The world had to change. the church was incapable of changing the world. My generation was encouraged to leave the church and do God’s work on the streets.

Before I’d been a pastor two months, my denomination asked me to be a speaker at our regional conference. They assigned me a title, “My Expectations in the Arena of the Church.” I suppose they shared my surprise that I was in the ministry and wanted to hear why.

Last week I was working on a writing project and ran across that talk given so long ago. I read it with a smile. I was reminded of a comment the great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, made when, as a mature theologian, he reread his first book. “Well roared, young lion.”

I didn’t exactly roar but I used strong language. One line struck me, “The church is worth saving not because of what the church is, but because of who Jesus Christ is and because Christ loves the church – to death.”

Looking back over the years, I would change that sentence dramatically. “The church is worth saving precisely because of what it is, and it is what it is because of Jesus Christ.”

I have lived in the family of God my entire adult life. In local congregations I have experienced lots of mothers. I remember one – a retired minister’s wife less than five feet tall. Occasionally, Grace would look up at me, wag her finger and say, “David, you look tired. You need to take some time off.” I didn’t particularly like it but I learned she was right. I let her be another mother to me.

I’ve had many fathers over the years. Good and faithful men have told me, “You can do it,” when I wasn’t sure I could. They’ve told me “You are doing it,” when I wasn’t so sure. “Good job,” Thank you,” “You’ve made a difference,” things fathers tell sons.

I don’t have a biological sister but I have lots of Christian sisters. I’ve learned from them the feminine side of life and the feminine character of God. I have more Christian brothers than I can count, men who’ve walked this journey of faith with me side by side.

It’s more than just another community on earth. We are what we are because Christ is among us. That makes all the difference in the world. Believe it. Leap into the arms of Christ’s church.

To borrow from – and with apologies to – John Denver:

Hey it’s good to be back home again,
Sometimes this old church seems like a long lost friend.
Yes, and hey it’s good to be back home again.

Amen.