

The Place of Our Resurrection

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 11, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:4b-14, NRSV)

It seems like we have been wandering for some time now. It may feel like we're wandering through a wilderness, with few signs of reaching the Promised Land anytime soon. But in faith, this wandering need not be a *meaningless* wandering ... It can instead be a highly purposeful journey in which we seek God's will and learn to live into it, even when we have little to hang on to. In this way, wandering may become a *pilgrimage*.

This theme of pilgrimage, of being driven by God to leave the known behind, in pursuit of God-knows-what, is deeply embedded in our scripture texts for today. Abraham didn't know where he was going when he left home by God's command. He could not have imagined what awaited him on the other side of that obedience ... what adventures would be had ... what a destiny to which he would be called! But his faith impelled him to *trust* God with that destiny, and he never looked back.

The Apostle Paul's story is a different one, in that, for years, he thought he didn't *have* to go looking for anything, because he knew *exactly* who he was and what his purpose was. He was a man who had every reason in the world to be confident – belonging to a people elect of God, from the best segment of those people, from the best family, from those who had God's revealed truth and were held in high honor for scrupulously following it.

But then, Paul meets the risen Jesus, and it throws his sensible, ordered world into disarray. All these points of pride, Paul says, are “rubbish” compared to the treasure of Christ, as the NRSV translates the Greek word Paul uses. “Rubbish” is such a *proper* English word for what Paul is really expressing here! I should probably not spell out a vastly more accurate translation, at least not in the pulpit, but suffice to say it’s a word for the sort of thing left behind by dogs in your neighborhood which you wouldn’t want to step in. All these points of pride and security are like *that*, compared to the treasure, Paul says, of knowing Christ and being found in him – our truest goal and highest end.

And so, he too is called to a journey ... a pilgrimage to leave behind those things in which he had previously trusted and to seek the One crucified and risen. Before, Paul seemed to have it all, but in meeting Christ, all that is revealed as false. This known world is no longer enough, and he too is impelled to become a pilgrim, to spend a lifetime coming to know Christ and living day-by-day into the power of his resurrection, wherever that might take him. *Wherever that might take him.*

That’s the scary part, isn’t it? Not *knowing* ... not being in charge ... not being in control of your own life’s story. We would always love to know where we are, and what things truly mean, and where we’re headed, and how best to move forward. But such clarity is neither the promise nor the hope of the gospel.

In the Celtic Christian tradition – the Christianity which flourished in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales – we can find many stories of Celtic saints who lived this truth in a remarkable way, for they practiced a particular kind of pilgrimage. Rather than following a planned route, heading towards a known destination such as Rome or Jerusalem, those simple monks followed a different pattern. After much prayer and self-dedication, a monk stepped into a small boat called a coracle. This coracle was made by bending strips of wood into a bowl shape, and then sealing leather over the wood with tar. A coracle looks like a big bowl. There are no oars. *A big bowl ... with no oars.*

The idea, then, was to get into the boat and entrust yourself to the will of God, and let it bear you away. It was an act of faith ... it was an act of self-surrender. You let go. You got into the boat, and cast yourself on the waters. The coracle would spin and drift as it sailed, moved along by the winds and currents, until at last it brought you to another shore. And there, you would live and serve and give yourself wholly to your calling, for the rest of your life. It would be your divinely chosen Home, that place where you would live and die.

The monks had a beautiful phrase for this pilgrimage. They called it a search for the “Place of my Resurrection.” It was understood as a literal place, but *also* as a place of the heart ... a place of the soul ... in which, over a lifetime, one lives into the purpose for which they were born, and so into abundant, eternal life ... into joy.

But this isn’t just about 6th century Irish monks. All of us are called to such a pilgrimage, though it takes a different shape from theirs ... It takes a unique shape in each of our lives. We may

never step into a literal coracle, but in every moment, we have a choice to let go of the illusion that we are the masters of our own lives and destinies. We aren't, and we never were.

Admitting this to ourselves may be hard enough, and setting out beyond our harbors of certainty, safety, and security is even harder, but the amazing claim of the gospel is that true life lies on the other side.

For Abraham, it was leaving his homeland behind and being led to a place of promise he had never seen. For Paul, it was a daily walk of self-surrender in imitation of Christ. For the Celtic saints, it was setting out upon the waters in search of the Place of their Resurrection. For each and all of them, God was the one calling – calling them beyond what they knew, into places where they would discover who they are, who God had created them to be. This is what the call to pilgrimage is. And this is the call to us today, even as we sojourn through a pandemic wilderness.

Taking these steps into the unknown is hard, I know, and there are many times along the journey when we meet with disappointments, learn hard lessons, endure pain and even tragedy, and we may even wonder if we have the strength to go on. But even in these times, there is so much more than we can see. As the Cherokee Elder said to his discouraged son: “Why do you sit brooding my boy? Do you not know that you are being driven by great winds across the sky?”

May we come to know that that Divine Mystery has impelled us on the journey from the beginning, and holds us and sustains us now. It is this Love for which we have longed all our life, though we didn't know it. It initiated our pilgrimage, though we were blind to it. It has been our rudder on the journey, though we couldn't sense it. This Love from which we can never be separated and which will never die – may it set us free, and may we be born again into the wild joy of our own life, in the place of our resurrection.

To the Glory of God. Amen.