

Re-Discovering the Cornerstone

Sermon 96 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 18, 2021

Acts 4:1-12

This year as Earth Day nears I find myself more grateful than ever before for the gift of God's beautiful Creation. Because of all the pandemic interruptions to the overly-chaotic schedule, I – like so many others – have found myself paying more attention to the rhythms of nature. Without the morning rush to get everyone fed and off to work and school, morning jogs and walks were able to start later and linger a little longer, allowing any open-eyed person to notice changing sight lines as autumn leaves turned their magnificent colors and then fell to the ground.

Then just as the cold of winter started to turn into spring, buds burst forth, boasting shades of pinks, yellows, whites, and greens that we might have never seen without the forced slow down, without the working from home, without the abrupt change to our busy schedules.

In many ways, the earth itself became a healing balm during the pandemic.

I know, from personal experience and from talking to many of you, that just stepping outdoors no matter the season was a lifeline, saving us from the monotony of zoom conferences, telephone calls, and computer screens.

So in many ways Earth Day seems right on time this year. It arrives as we are becoming tempted to fill our days back up, stacked with meetings, tasks, dinner dates, and appointments. Earth Day arrives right on time this year, as an invitation to pause and give thanks for the gift of Creation and perhaps also as an invitation to reserve some time, before our days get too full once again, to slow down and get outside.

One thing I've learned as the year has allowed more time outdoors is that nature always seems to have a spiritual lesson, if I'm open to it.

Last year, as the weather started to cool off a bit, summer flowers had exhausted all their blooms, and leaves were beginning to fall, I decided to dig up some hostas that were growing in the front of the house. Now, I love hostas but they were growing near the driveway and at the height of their season, it was difficult to get in and out of the car without stepping on them or closing one of the tall shoots in the door. So I decided to dig them all up and move them into the back yard. I carefully traced the plant leaves to the roots, and dug up all the roots, working hard to treat them gently and keep them as intact as possible.

This was a lot of work! I don't know if you've ever tried to dig up hostas but they are resilient little plants with stubborn roots! When the project was done, I was awfully proud of myself. I filled in the ground where I'd removed the plants and covered it with mulch so it blended in with the rest of the area. I found the perfect spot in the back yard and placed the hostas there, burying the roots with good soil and stepping back with great

anticipation about what they would look like this spring, when they were reborn (so to speak) in their new location.

The cool air of fall quickly turned to winter as I watched that ground and waited. And just a few weeks ago, as winter faded into spring I watched more closely, surveying the ground for the first shoots of hosta that would push through the ground. At the same time, I would remember their old location next to the driveway and appreciate the new space I had every time I loaded and unloaded the car.

Eventually, the first signs of life shot up through the ground in the back yard – and I got so excited! I'd bring Mia and Justin out there to show them (they weren't as thrilled as I was... but they politely obliged). But just as my excitement grew, watching those hostas emerge from their winter sleep in the new backyard location, I noticed something strange was happening in the front yard... in their old spot.

Hostas were popping up there too! In the old spot, next to the driveway, where I had meticulously dug up roots months and months before. There they were, resilient little plants, springing back to life almost as full as they were last year.

It never fails to amaze me at how the rhythms of nature so often remind us of how God works and *is working* in our lives.

For many of us this has been a season of uprooting, of transplanting, and of starting again in new locations or under new circumstances. Whether the uprooting has happened at work or at home, in our social lives or in our private lives, everything feels different now.

Many of these changes have us trying to adapt to new soil, roots that once felt deep and connected have been dug up and replanted. How will they grow in this new ground?

Like the crowds who pressed in on Peter and John as the earliest Christians gathered in Jerusalem, we have more questions than answers in this new location. *How will we live like this? How is this going to work? Will it ever feel the same again?*

Of course their circumstances were a little different from ours. They were trying to revive the mission after the Roman authorities, in cahoots with religious institutional leadership had crucified Jesus in an effort to stamp out his movement. They thought if they could kill the leader, in a public display of capital punishment, the followers would heed the message and that would be the end of it. The end of this idea that the sick could be healed, the powerless empowered, and the oppressed could be freed. After all, that idea, that kind of liberation threatened everything that upheld the Roman way.

Jesus' message tore at the roots of the Roman way of life. It didn't fit in with the status quo and required a re-imagining of all conventional wisdom.

But like the resilient hostas that refused to be removed, the work of the Spirit continued to grow in Jerusalem.

Quoting from an ancient Psalm, Peter says to the crowds, “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, it has become the cornerstone.” That movement of healing and liberation that you tried to stamp out and remove by crucifying Jesus, it has become the very foundation of the movement. What you thought would end it once and for all only multiplied our efforts and gave new life to the resurrecting power of God’s Holy Spirit.

For some time now, we have been rooted in a common soil. Our pre-pandemic lives were predictable, steady, busy, and productive. But now all of that has changed and not just because of the pandemic. During our time apart we have all become new and different. We have been changed by unique challenges and opportunities that have come our way (invited or not). Our relationships feel different. Our spiritual practices have evolved.

We have been uprooted and replanted and the patterns that have developed in this “new soil” of the last year are teaching us about how we might be re-born on the other side of this big ordeal.

In some ways we have been called back to the foundation, we’ve dug down to the cornerstone and we are rebuilding from there.

For us, as Christians, I think this might be the biggest gift we’ve ever received. With thousands of years of history separating us from the life of Jesus... with hundreds of years of tradition tying us to practices that used to reflect faith and over time began to look more like status quo... with 36 years as a church we have built some good structures on top of that foundational stone, that cornerstone... and perhaps it *was and is* time for us to re-examine them all, to consider the cornerstone and allow the Holy Spirit to grow something new in our church... in our lives.

Like those resilient hostas, there will be resurrection in this new soil. I can already see it happening as Sunday school classes gather together online without geographic restrictions, allowing folks to join from the beach, the lake, and the mountains. I can see it when I walk our campus and see the earth art displays reminding us of God’s blessing of creation. I can see it as we re-imagine worship for online and in-person platforms... who would have imagined sprouts like this?

And... like those resilient hostas, there is still resurrection in the old soil. Even when we thought it was all gone, dug up and replanted... the Holy Spirit is still firmly rooted and beginning to spring back to life in this Sanctuary, in our collaboration with important local partners like Welcome House Ministries, Refugee Hope Partners, and food pantries around town.

Yes, like those resilient hostas we have been divided and replanted in soils of the past, present, and future. And we continue to be surprised and delighted by the new sprouts that are bursting forth in all kinds of surprising places.

Perhaps we needed this season of disruption to remind us of our resilient roots, planted in the ground of God's love and nurtured to new life by the creative power of the Holy Spirit to help us remember, rediscover, and resurrect the Gospel of Jesus Christ here and now.