

Renewing, Redefining, Resurrecting : Walking by Faith, not by Sight
A Graduation Sermon
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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2 Corinthians 4:16 -- 5:10

In last week's passage we heard Paul speak about the difficulties of faith and the persecution that believers have to endure in the early church. Now, none of us here now will likely go to the lions, be arrested or physically beaten because of our faith. That's not exactly our reality or the persecutions that we deal with. But still, there are many things in life that can make life difficult for us. So how do you deal with it?

On the surface, Paul's answer seems pretty simple (or is that, simplistic?): When we encounter hardships, as Christians, we walk by faith. He exhorts each and every Christ follower to have confidence in the faith and in what has already happened through Jesus. For Paul, it's all about living through the suffering. He almost sounds like he's falling into that dangerous area of "pull yourself together and get focused", you know, the place where good therapists advise NOT to go with people who are anxious or afraid.

Paul has obviously NOT attended the pastoral care course most of us ministers have.

A contemporary Christ follower with a contemporary faith often lives more with doubt and questions. We are not scared of these things in the same way as Paul, who seems to see them as weakness. Life often presents us with the opportunity to see something in a positive or a negative light.

The Pixar/Disney movie "Finding Nemo" tells the story of the overprotective clownfish named Marlin who, along with a blue tang named Dory, searches for his abducted son Nemo all the way to Sydney Harbour. In one pivotal scene, both fish are accidentally taken into the mouth of a passing Sperm Whale. There, in the dark and scary place, Marlin despairs, complains, and sinks to the floor. Dory makes another choice... she swims around, does some flips, and tries to speak with the whale in his own language.

Dory is definitely a glass-half-full kind of thinker and her positive (and clueless) attitude really irritates Marlin. When the water level in the whale's mouth begins to recede, Dory hears the whale telling them to retreat to the back of the throat. Poor Marlin is absolutely terrified that they will soon be eaten. Something in her trusts that everything will be alright and she pulls the reluctant Marlin to where they were told to be, telling him "It's time to let go! Everything is going to be alright!" Marlin responds "How do you know? How do you know something bad isn't going to happen?" She says "I don't!" and they are plunged into the depths. Suddenly, the whale ejects them BOTH out of her blowhole. Miraculously, they are saved!¹

Today we celebrate those graduating from high schools and colleges and universities. It's a time of turning from the past and turning towards the future, of heading into adventures unknown, leaving family (perhaps for the first time), or leaving the friends you were used to seeing every day in school and really growing up. And the thing about this particular transition is that the point of it all is that you are actively seeking your own identity and calling and place in this world. That's exciting, but rarely easy.

And you might feel a little bit like Marlin wanting to hold on to what you know. Or like Dory, ready to be launched into a new reality. Or maybe even a little of both. At the same time. See what I mean? Not. Easy.

Within the last few weeks I have had conversations with some of you about your child entering college, about the choices they have made, about what you imagine the future may look like, about marriage, parenting, retirement, about moving from homes to retirement communities, about having to learn to live alone, or that a beloved family member has died, about starting new after the loss of a job – all of these are passages, changes, moving from the past and towards the present.

It can, when you are in the midst of it, be overwhelming. And it's completely understandable, in the midst of all of that change, to feel as if you have lost your bearings. But this morning I want to remind you (and truly, remind myself) of the thing that can move us from fear, worry, and panic to hope, joy and courage. The thing that places us on a peak of trust and contentment where we might rise above the valley of anxiety... and that thing is faith.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnERX32FL24>

You and I exist on this long continuum of grace. Each one of us has a story in our past of how we came through whatever it was that almost broke us. We look to scripture – our faith’s story and hear the spirit of God bringing our ancestor’s through too – out of slavery, out of oppression, out of despair and into the promised land, into the new world, into hope. The passages of life are not always easy – but there is promised resolution, promised delivery, promised resurrection.

As the famous hymn “Amazing Grace” declares: “It is grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will bring me home!”

Graduates.... As you move on to the next chapter in your lives I want to urge you (and your parents) to begin every day with reminding yourself from whence you came. No, I don’t mean your hometown, Trumbull or Monroe, Shelton or Oxford.

When you look back upon your life so far, what have been some of your deepest valley moments? Was it the loss of someone you loved? Did you not make the team, or get into the good school you wanted? Or did you struggle socially, and feel left out? Fear, pain, despair, anxiety, loss... none of us are immune.

Was there someone there to love you through it? Someone that gave you hope, or made you laugh through your tears? Do you think, maybe, that the spirit of God was present with you during those times? I wish that I could tell you that this next chapter of your life will be a piece of cake. There will be times when you will feel overwhelmed, ill equipped and underwater. Maybe God can use those moments to shape us into the caring, compassionate, loving, forgiving people we are truly called to be.

Our faith is grounded on the hope that we are always moving towards some new dimension of resolution, or reconciliation, of reunion, of being. And that can bring us hope and imagination.

And that is a very encouraging thought to me. We have a past and we have a future. We can’t see it, the Apostle Paul writes, but we might try and imagine it. That future hope can help us keep our eyes on the prize, or perhaps just get through.

I think of the heroes who pressed for civil rights. In the darkest days of racial oppression in this country there were those who remembered the biblical story of liberation. There were those who kept hope alive and used their imaginations to think about the day when all God's children had rights, and all citizens could vote. Moments of crisis in our nation tend to nudge us toward a new reality. This is only possible because the past was remembered and the future was hoped for faithful people of all ages, tongues and races. That is where true change happens, not by clinging to nostalgia and thinking we can bring things back to the way we think we remember it used to be, or reacting out of anxiety and fear, but by pausing, praying and then moving forward in memory and hope!

And this is where you and I are encouraged to live – grounded in a story of deliverance and perched on the precipice of hope, in a future that cannot be seen but can be imagined.

Birth, graduation, marriage, first job, retirement, moves, joys, tragedies, triumphs, deaths – where will your heart, head and vision focus on during the transitions? I pray that you are able to keep your eyes set on that glorious horizon, remember who and whose you are, and live in resurrection hope. And now, if our graduates will join me in the front of the church, let's surround them with our prayers and blessings.