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Easter 5B, 2018 (Quilt Sunday)
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April 29, 2018
John 15:1-8

OF VINE, BRANCHES, AND QUILTS

Christ is risen! **Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!**

Is this greeting getting a little old? (6 weeks of Lent, but 7 weeks of Easter.)
Maybe we sometimes wonder, at least to ourselves, is this really worth our time and energy?
Even, what if it's not really *true?...*Especially when we heard this past week that only 28% of us out here consider ourselves strongly religious. Are we playing the fool?

I suspect Jesus knew that would happen, to his closest friends even.

The evangelist John tells us that it was after washing his disciples' feet, and just before leaving for the garden and Judas' kiss of betrayal, that Jesus said these words to his disciples. Half a century later, Christians gathered for their weekly meal together and memory-sharing, read these words. The question is the same, whether for the first disciples, reeling from the events of three days, or to the next generation pondering their lives in the midst of people who considered them, at the least, weird, or to us. How do we sustain this resurrected life? How do we keep going?

Enter the vine. Or maybe a branch. (bring out vine cutting) Hmm-looks quite lovely doesn't it? Nice, fat buds. Snipped it just this morning. It was growing across the garden, where it shouldn't. What do you think will happen to it? Do you think it will bear grapes? Why not?

What did Jesus say to his disciples, just after doing the astounding thing of stripping off most of his clothes and washing the feet of his friends? And just before walking off to a garden and a trial and a crucifixion? Hear again verse 5 of our Gospel reading today:

I AM THE VINE, YOU ARE THE BRANCHES. THOSE WHO ABIDE IN ME, AND I IN THEM, BEAR GREAT FRUIT.

The key word here is *abide.* More than *think about.* More than *remember with all your heart*. More even than *worship.*

A few days ago I saw a photo of Senator from Illinois rolling into the U.S. Senate chamber – did you see the picture, too? Nestled close to her, next to her breast, was her newborn...serene (at least for the moment), safe, secure. At rest. Now, that's *abiding*, I said (a thought that probably wouldn't have occurred to me if I hadn't been abiding in this text in preparation for today.)

And yet, close, but not quite, because abiding is closer than the baby, closer even than the sheep and the shepherd we talked about last week. It so intimate, that one could scarcely tell the two apart: the vine and the branch, or the believer and her Lord. Abiding in the vine is <u>life-giving.</u>

The vine just bears fruit, all by itself. We don't have to do anything….as long as those branches are connected to the vine, life flows freely. And fruits form and grow and ripen. The life of the branches is in the vine.

Ours, too.

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We're watered and washed (font), fed (table), nourished (Scriptures at lectern) by words written and by Word lived among us (congregation).

Note how our passage doesn't say, Jesus died for you. Now you do something for him, Get going! No conditions, no "if this, then that…" Just like that vine over our deck—sometimes you can almost see it grow, the moisture dripping from its leaves, and the little green dots get longer and fuller and redder and juicier. "Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit."

And so do we bear fruit –I see all kinds of fruit-bearing branches in front of me:

- garden-tenders
- someone who rides ferries to invite people to sign I-1361[1]
- youth who are combating human trafficking
- teachers who really listen to their students, and students who are really, really kind to others who are bullied
- people who e-mail their legislators about firearms and hunger
- soup-makers and bread bakers
- some who don't want any recognition, who without any fanfare, regularly check on neighbors, take them grocery shopping and to doctors' appointments, who take time to just sit with elders who are lonely.
- I see solar panels and tiny houses.
- And I see the makers of quilts – where are you? Stand up.

Now I hear that you have a very good time together...that there's a lot of laughter. But we all know that something else significant takes place: the creation of these marvelous quilts. And we know that these quilts go to Lutheran World Relief.

I have a story for you...about "The Girl with a Thousand Eyes." Mehret's story.

It was a spring Sunday, much like this. Quilts spread over the pews and the rails—beautiful to behold, waiting to be blessed. Mehret and her sister Salaam had just climbed the stairs to the balcony in the church –Calvary—where some of us used to be members.

Later on we would learn more of Mehret's story – leaving their village in Eritrea in the middle of night, carrying nothing with them, so as not to draw attention, and, in the refugee camp, when their mother was ill, baking and selling bread. For now, we knew only that since her father Hubte and older brothers had been worshipping with us at Calvary, we had prayed nearly every Sunday for the family to be reunited.

When Mehret saw the quilts on the balcony rail and then spread on all the pews, her eyes got big.

"What are these for? " I explained.
Then, after a pause, "Where do they go?"
"All over the world." Another pause.
"WE had one of these quilts."

Mehret told us how they used the quilt, for shelter, and then a blanket for her two younger brothers.

[1] I-1361 is an initiative being proposed for Washington State ballot that would assess fees on carbon producers. The goal, broadly speaking, is to reduce carbon use and accelerate efforts to move away from fossil fuel based economy.

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But...even more:

> "In our country, it was important to every girl that she have a new dress for the new school year. But there was no way that could happen for me. My mother was so sick, and we had nothing. But then our mother began to take apart our quilt. And she refashioned it into a dress for me! It was beautiful! I was so proud—I didn't even care when the other kids teased me and called me "girl with a thousand eyes" because of all the colors. I was so happy."

That quilt, dear friends, was more than an act of charity. To a young girl, it brought dignity. It conveyed respect. It gave a young girl a sense of herself as beloved and capable and strong. It was truly life-giving.

As the vine gives life to the branches, so do the branches bear life. In truth, one cannot distinguish between vine and branches, so close is this "abiding."

And this is the greatest mystery of all: that when we abide in the Vine, and the Vine abides in us, our lives are indistinguishable, one from the other. For our crucified and risen Lord IS alive—in you, and in me. Praise be, praise be!

Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen!