

Easter Sermon Series: *It Doesn't Happen Overnight-“Bulbs”*
Salem United Methodist Church
Luke 24:36-48; Acts 3:12-19
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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Spring has finally arrived! Flowers are blooming, the grass is green, and the buds are coming out on the trees. Just a few short weeks ago, the weather was cold and snowy. With the arrival of spring we are reminded of the God's unbelievable creative power. We also see this power with the resurrection of Jesus. God's power can see the possibility of a flower in a bulb, and God's power can see in us what we cannot see in ourselves.

Every fall people buy and plant bulbs that will bloom in the spring. Tulip, daffodil, and crocus bulbs will lie dormant in the hard cold ground for months. When the conditions are just right, when there is enough rain, enough sunlight, enough warm temperatures, the bottom plate of the bulb will begin to grow roots. These roots will grow into the soil to absorb water and other nutrients for the soon-to-be plant. The stored energy in the bulb provides the power for the roots to grow downward and for the small green shoots to grow upward. Once the small green shoots are out of the ground they begin to absorb the sunshine. The process of photosynthesis begins to produce oxygen and sugar for the plant. So a spring flower that grows from a bulb has received nourishment from three sources: bulb, roots, and the leaves. Our eyes can see none of this when we look at a bulb. All we see is a brown, circular, hard ball that appears to be lifeless. But this hard little ball has the potential to produce beautiful flowers. We cannot see, but God can.

When Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee at the beginning of his ministry, he saw the potential in the fisherman's apprentice, Simon. Apprentices would have been the age of teenagers during the time of Jesus. Simon was learning the family trade from his father, Zebedee, until Jesus said, "Come, follow me. And I will teach you how to fish for people." Like God sees the potential in a bulb to produce a flower, Jesus saw the potential in this rugged, strong teen-ager who had little to no formal education and had not yet reached adulthood. Jesus saw something in Simon that given the right amount of instruction and the power of the Holy Spirit could produce an Apostle. In fact, Jesus stated that he would build his church on Simon and changed his name to Peter, which means "the rock" in Greek. Peter heard every sermon Jesus gave. He was privy to all the private explanations of the many parables Jesus told. He sat at the table with Jesus on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested. He heard the long talk Jesus gave them on his upcoming death and resurrection on the third day. Yet, later that evening while Peter was trying to find out what was happening to Jesus, he denies his Master three times. On that Easter morning, Peter was one of the disciples who ran to the empty tomb to see if Mary Magdalene's account was accurate. Not understanding what exactly happened, Peter and the other disciples then locked themselves in a room when Jesus appears to them. They were afraid, perhaps they were also feeling guilty about abandoning Jesus. Perhaps there was some survivor's guilt, too. None of this mattered to Jesus. He continued to see the potential in these men and women. Obviously they couldn't believe their eyes or ears. Jesus was dead, killed, crucified. How could he be standing in front of them talking, eating? But he was. And Jesus uses this exact moment to continue to teach them. It's as though Jesus is pouring the sunshine, rain, and warm temperatures onto these bulbs of disciples knowing that they will bloom. He's says to them, "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name... You will be witnesses of these things." A change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins. The death and resurrection of Jesus is all about God seeing the potential in us. It is about how we are changed when we ask for the forgiveness of our sins. The Resurrection of Christ is about the change of hearts and lives. That change begins when forgiveness takes away the pain we carry with us when someone hurts us. With this new freedom of forgiveness we are given that change of heart and a new life. Before we realize it, we begin to bud and blossom. This process doesn't happen overnight. It took the Peter and the disciples three years of Jesus' teaching plus fifty days after the resurrection before they had all the right components to bloom. In today's scripture reading we heard Peter preaching and giving witness to thousands of people about the death and resurrection of Jesus. He calls for the people to turn back to God, to receive forgiveness, and to live with changed hearts and lives. Wow! Peter is blooming! He knows what it is to receive forgiveness of his sins. Jesus not only forgave him, but instructed him to go and preach. Is this the same person who dropped his fishing nets by the Sea of Galilee? Yes, it is. Peter, forgiven with a change of heart and life.

Ruth Schwab has a new life that is quite different from the one she had twenty years ago. She is a member of First United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. Twenty years ago today she was sitting at her desk in the HUD office of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building when Timothy McVeigh detonated a fertilizer bomb which killed 168 and injured about 2500. Shards of glass cut into both of her eyes. Profusely bleeding she could not see anything that had happened. A co-worker helped her get out of the building. After eight hours of surgery her left eye was saved, but there was no hope for her right eye. She went home from the hospital on her 47th birthday, grateful to be alive. She faced multiple surgeries to her face and endured great physical pain. As time went on, she realized she lost a lot more than her eye. She lost her job because there was no place to go to work. She lost her pay check which she depended on. And she lost many close colleagues including her friend, Pat Nix. Pat was everybody's friend. Her co-workers would gravitate to Pat and tell her their problems. Pat kept a box of Bible verses on her desk. After they had finished sharing their problems, Pat would hand them her box of Bible verses and tell them to take one. Then she would say, "Just wait; God's going to fix it. Just trust him." Ruth wondered how God was going to fix the mess the bombing created. Feeling overwhelmed, helpless, and angry, Ruth states, "I walked through my house, yelling. 'Timothy McVeigh, I hate you! Why did you blow up our building and kill so many innocent people and leave so many of us messed up for the rest of our lives! I didn't do anything to you. Why did you do this to me?'" And she became angry with God asking, "Why, God, would you allow this to happen?" She felt guilty for surviving and grieved her losses. Ruth soon became an angry, bitter woman filled with hate. "I tried, but for a long time, I couldn't forgive." She doesn't remember when it happened. Letting go of the anger and hate was a process. But she has no doubts that God saved her first physically and then emotionally and spiritually. "God pulled me through." She realizes that God worked through the rescue workers, medical professionals who saved her life, through her family and friends who stood by her, through a Christian counselor who helped her through the post-trauma stress, and through the countless people who prayed for her. She knows that "God worked through her church which embraced her and gave her the space to grieve and grow, to share and serve, and to forgive and be forgiven." She states, "I have lost an eye; I still have some pain; I still don't have all the answers to all the whys," she says. "But I'm healed! God has healed me." For Ruth, getting to the point that she could forgive was a twenty year process. Once she was able to reach this point, she bloomed into a new heart and life. Even with this tragedy, even with all the pain that Ruth and others have suffered, God sees the potential for healing and a new start.

When Jesus was crucified, Peter and the other disciples thought all their hopes and dreams were dead. They had reached the end of their journey with Jesus. But this end was just a beginning. The crucifixion, the resurrection, and the empowering of the disciples all happened in God's time. God can take something that appears to be dead and create a new life. God sees the potential in the Crucifixion, in the Oklahoma bombing, and in all the devastating moments in our lives. God can and will make something beautiful from something ugly. It does take time for a bulb to grow and bloom. It also takes time for God to create something beautiful out of the devastating moments of our lives. It doesn't happen overnight. So trust in God's time.

There is a song, called "In His Time." The words are this, In God's time, In God's time, God makes all things beautiful in God's time. Lord, please show me every day as you're teaching me your way that you do just what you say in your time."

Reflection Questions: How have you experienced God making something beautiful out of a difficult time in your life? How has the church been part of this amazing process?

References: "Oklahoma City bombing survivor says God helped her forgive," by Rev. Boyce A. Bowdon, umc.org/news-and-media