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Still Easter – I Corinthians 15: 34-38 (The Message)

Easter Sunday was three weeks ago – but according to the church calendar, it's still Easter, even though the eggs and lilies are gone. In fact, in Christianity, Easter never ends, because the power of Christ's resurrection continues on.

On Easter, I spoke about how the resurrection can be a part of each of our lives every day, starting each day, each moment fresh. Today, we're taking a different tack.

We're beginning a new series this week, using the Book of Confessions as our inspiration. The Book of Confessions is a collection of statements of faith that Christians have made over the years, and which our denomination has determined articulate in human terms the reality of what God has done and is doing among us – a pretty daunting task! But one so important that this Book of Confessions is Part One of our church's Constitution, and everyone ordained in the church states at their ordination and installation that they believe that what is contained in this book faithfully represent what Christianity is about. You heard our newest Elders do just that just a few minutes ago!

The confessions remind us over and over of the reality of the resurrection, not just Christ's, but our own. We've already said together what one of the earliest, the Apostles' Creed, states: that Jesus, "on the third day, rose from the dead" and that we believe in "the resurrection of the body" – meaning our own. That's about as simple as it gets; just statements of what those who put together this statement of faith knew. And although the Apostles' Creed in the form we have it doesn't go quite so far back as the time of the apostles, its words come from the experience of that very first Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But though this creed is short and simple, what it teaches is not, and as the church grew into the institution it has become, what subsequent statements of faith had to say about the resurrection grew, too: from statements to explanations to interpretations and applications, so that in one recent confession we see the resurrection as a model of God's reconciliation of the world to himself.

But true and important as that is, let's take a step back to a time even before the creeds, to Paul's discussion of the importance of the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians (we're reading from The Message translation). Paul is already confronting those who question such a difficult concept to grasp, and wants us to be certain just how important it is for our faith as a whole (I Corinthians 15:34-44).

We've had some, well, adventures with our landscaping at the DeLong household over the years. One of the more recent has to do with two trees we planted out front, one to replace a palo verde tree that was threatening to destroy our driveway, another filling a gap in the yard. We did our best to plant them well and correctly. We tied them into our irrigation system, but that's been a bit sketchy, and to tell you the truth, over the winter I came to be convinced, much to my distress, that those trees had died. There was absolutely no green on them anywhere, they were completely barren of leaves, even brown ones. The ends of the branches weren't flexible or pliable at all, and cutting down into a branch didn't show any green – sure signs to me, at least, that they were truly gone, that there was no life at all left in them.

But I was wrong. Today both those trees are covered with leaves, were even covered with beautiful blooms until the rain knocked them off last week.

So, in the light of Paul's analogies of seeds and stars not necessarily being what God will make them in the end, what does what happened to our trees have to say about life, death, and the resurrection?

To me, it says that nothing is truly dead until God says it is. Just because there is no apparent life present doesn't mean that God's done working his divine masterpiece, and that there is still life there, even if it's a resurrection life.

You heard what Paul had to say to his congregation in Corinth! We don't really understand life, let alone death. Think of his example of a tomato. Looking at an unplanted seed is more often than not like looking at the branches of the tree out in my yard, and seeing no signs of life whatever. But what happens when conditions change? Amazing things. A little black seed becomes a plant, becomes a mature tomato.

And there are plenty of other startling examples. I happened to catch the end of a program a couple of weeks ago that chronicled the area around a river in Africa that hadn't flowed in twenty years. The vegetation had scaled back to the most drought-resistant of plants; a very few tiny pockets of moisture left here and there in what had been a mighty riverbed were all that the small number of animals that persisted in the area could get by on, and not well. Everything had come down to protecting access to what little water remained – animals had changed their behaviors to make sure they had what they could to survive.

But something happened, and that's what the show documented: rains fell in the mountains miles away, rains that hadn't fallen in twenty years, and a slow trickle of water began to flow down what barely looked like a riverbed anymore, a landscape far more desolate than our Santa Cruz.

The rains made something amazing happen. A river happened! The water worked its way down, bit by bit, gaining strength and soaking

the ground. Even more amazingly, within minutes of becoming wet again, creatures that had gone into some strange form of hibernation began to come back to life and pick up where they'd left off two decades before – frogs and lizards and even fish. All of them raced to take advantage of this new bounty, and what had seemed lifeless and marginal began to teem with life. A dead world sprang back to life, almost, it seemed, instantly.

In the light of things like this, looking back at our passage where Paul gets testy with those who ask for details about just how the resurrection works, I see his point. I don't think any of us can have any comprehension of what the resurrection will truly be like, because even though we have Jesus' example, he was, after all, the son of God, and I suspect that just as in so many other ways, the resurrection we will experience will look quite different. But we will go on to live forever, just as Christ promised.

Back to the confessions and our beliefs: we have the statements, just as in the Apostles' Creed, and we have the detailed explications of the later confessions. But what is important for us is that we recognize the truth of this mysterious doctrine, and make use of it not just for ourselves, but as people of faith.

How do we make use of it? Well, we apply it to the life we're living right now. We've talked a lot about Jesus' statement about love:

“Love one another as I have loved you.” As we try to follow his words, the first thing we have to know as we seek to love one another is to understand how Jesus loved us, and then apply those principles in our own lives. We can do the same with the resurrection.

The resurrection is proof that we have been reconciled to God – God has accepted us and made it possible, in our resurrected bodies, to be with him forever. What could that mean for us? Well, it could mean, as one of the creeds, the Confession of 67, puts it: we need to be reconciled to each other as God has reconciled us to him. That would mean that we need to treat each other not as transient acquaintances, but as fellow eternal beings. Why? Because we won’t just know each other for a few minutes or months or years, but eventually for eternity. That’s a pretty startling thought: we won’t be reunited just with those we loved on earth, we’ll be together with everyone who’s ever lived – even those we didn’t like.

Christians have been called an Easter people, and that’s what being an Easter people is about – about the permanence of our relationships in God rather than the transience of this earthly life. Does that make life here now less important, this emphasis on forever? No, it makes it more important, even crucial, because how we live now will determine how we live forever. How might that change the way you look at others – not just the people you see at the Safeway, but those you have never met, strangers? How might it change the way that we be a church?

But finally, please remember this: don't ever call something dead that God can make live, whether it's a seed, a tree branch, a relationship – or even you.