

Eugene Peterson, "Practice Resurrection"

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ises, commands, and rewards us in terms that are indifferent, even oblivious, to the most significant thing about us, God's action and our orientation in that action? How can we have even a ghost of a chance to be known as we really are by leaders and teachers and parents, coaches and psychiatrists and poets, salespersons and judges and legislators, all of whom treat us on the working premise that we are all lost in the cosmos? With all these voices coming at us from every direction and at all hours, how do we acquire a God-oriented identity?

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Looking in the mirror and naming what we see as "saint" is one way. We follow that up by redefining these people around us as saints. It is a start. It is where Paul starts. He names us saints — not because we are so wonderful but because he sees us truly as ever and always in the company of the Holy Trinity: holy men, holy women, holy children, holy, holy, holy.

In our identity-confused society, too many of us have settled for a pastiche identity composed of social security number, medical records, academic degrees, job history, and whatever fragments of genealogy we can salvage from the cemeteries. Christians can do better: we are *baptized*, baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By virtue of *that* name, not our family name, we are saints.

Paul does not name the readers (or hearers as the case may be) of his Ephesian letter saints because of their spiritual heroics or their moral athleticism. He has been around Christians for a few years and he knows us pretty well. And he knows himself. He has no pious illusions about these saints or himself. It has been several years since he was their pastor. He probably knows only a few of them by name. True, he knows a little: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers" (1:15-16). But this is hearsay knowledge. How can he be serious in designating them as saints — holy?

Here's how: holy does not refer to them as they are in themselves;

it refers to who they are in God. Paul is not particularly interested in them psychologically. Their moral behavior doesn't top the list of what makes them who they are. It is God's intent for them and God's action for and in them that defines them. It is not what they think of themselves, or how well they are doing in life, or how good they are that defines them. God — those seven verbs! — is definitive for who they are. Paul knows that. He is not going to let them forget it.

One of the ways Paul reinforces this new way for Christ's followers to understand themselves is by calling them saints. "Holy" names not who they are on their own but who God is in and for them, not what they do but what God does in them. Paul understands them primarily and comprehensively in relation to the way God treats them, not the way they treat God. It is God's *calling* for us to be set apart from the ways of the world in order to be positioned to follow the assignments he gives us. The most important thing about any one of us is not what we do but what God does, not what we do for God but what God does for us. It is because we know what God does in and for us that we are no longer lost in the cosmos.

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But there is also this. Anybody who has spent any time at all in the company of Christians knows that none of us whom Paul calls saints is a saint in any conventional sense. Most of us are not exceptionally good or good-looking. It is worse than that. Adultery and addictions, gossip and gluttony, arrogance and propaganda, sexual abuse and self-righteousness are as likely to occur — even flourish — in congregations of Christians as in any school or college, any bank or army, any government or business. Still, Paul doesn't hesitate to name these men and women in his congregation as saints.

And there is no use looking around for a congregation that is any better. It has always been this way. As far as we can anticipate, it always will be. Horrible crimes continue to be committed by these saints. Terrible injustices continue to be perpetrated by saints. But God, it seems, is not squeamish about keeping company with the worst and the vile.

He goes to work. He spends his time with the saints and their ministries on earth.

A few years later, on the difficult week by week unsatisfactory reflection: "Jesus' rage. . . . Jesus brought into the world committed his formation of the Divine mystery. Jesus' temple cleansing to protest or for God of blasphemy to return his love ally sacrificing

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In his letter him: "I agree. I maintain your hurt followed up with gation, scrub

He goes to work each day to redeem the worst. I can't imagine that he spends his time carefully screening through the best in order to recruit saints and then preempt heaven by launching utopian church communities on earth.

A few years ago I was in correspondence with a friend, also a pastor, on the difficulties and nearly continuous embarrassment of working week by week our entire vocational lives with, to our minds, such unsatisfactory saints. Tempted to outrage, he caught himself and reflected: "Jesus did not fool around with the drug of editorializing outrage. . . . Jesus went for the jugulars of real, specific persons God brought into his influence. He 'wasted his time' on small potatoes. He committed himself to the companionship of real people and the transformation of the motives and modes of these few souls. Holy paradox. Divine mystery. Trust in the present and personal God who loves. Jesus' temple cleansing and confrontations of authorities were not done to protest or fix. They were done to convict the worshiping people of God of blasphemy, to foster repentance before God, to honor the holy, to return his love. And they were done as part of Jesus' road to personally sacrificing his life. It's the way of the cross."

We talk about this, my friend and I, from time to time. We are trying to develop facility in using the "saint" word as easily and unguardedly as Paul did. Recently, my friend had to deal with a man fed up and angry with the church and its bad track record in matters of justice and righteousness. The man admired Jesus extravagantly but had quit on the church. He was declaring a formal self-excommunication from the unpromising collection of ne'er-do-wells that he found in churches.

The atmosphere didn't seem to encourage conversation, so my friend wrote him a letter. He sent a copy to me. I keep it in a drawer in my desk and pull it out occasionally to reread it. It helps to keep my head clear on saint language.

In his letter my friend confronted the man first by agreeing with him: "I agree. It's very hard to participate in church over time and retain your humanity. You correctly deplore what you criticize." Then he followed up with a blunt question, "Yet do you worship with a congregation, scrub its floors, change its babies, face its crises, humble your-

self to its relational intricacies? The Jesus you admire did. He honored and observed worship and community. He formed a new communion while honoring the old. He lived as a participant. It was not from without but from within the 'people of God' that he confronted sin. And it was not from without but from within that he was censored and killed. It's the church that he came to build that killed him, not a network of autonomous idealists."

Then he zeroed in: "The church is woefully sinful, distorted, and inadequate. In its seasons and centuries it is often in bed with commerce, the military, and the political establishment, or just as bad, opportunistically leeching superficial life out of them by reactionism. But it's still in the bowels of the church, the worshipers, that God has chosen to work, live, and sometimes be crucified. It's the church, that Jesus says he will build, and that hell will not prevail against."³

Saints — the "bowels of the church." I like that. It is not much different from Paul's self-description that he wrote to the saints in Corinth: "we have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Cor. 4:13).

Here is a marvel: from within these bowels comes a continuous witness, sounds of praise, the totally unexpected word "resurrection," talk of healing and forgiveness, preaching and praying. And all this in the bowels, from among men and women who are unashamed and unembarrassed to call the failed and sometimes unscrupulous, flawed and not infrequently scandalous men and women who are their "brothers and sisters" saints.

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This improbable saint identity is affirmed and further clarified in the act of baptism. Holy baptism defines a person comprehensively as a creation, new creation and ongoing creation, of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a person totally immersed in all the operations of the Trinity. It is the one practice that the entire Christian

3. Letter from M.C., July 25, 2006.

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church (Quakers excepted) worldwide and through all its centuries of existence has continuously carried out: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Some baptize only adults. Some baptize infants. But for virtually everybody, baptism is the identity-defining act that marks us as saints, as Christians. Baptism is a public witness that this baptized person can be accurately understood only in relation to who God is, the way God reveals himself, and the ways that God works.

Baptism marks a radically new way to understand ourselves and one another: not by race, not by language, not by parents and family, not by politics, not by intelligence, not by gender, not by behavior. All of these various ways of accounting for ourselves are significant, but none is definitive. Holy baptism defines us as holy, as saints. Baptism is definitive.

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Having acquired this identity, how do we maintain it? We maintain our baptismal identity in the practice of resurrection, *Jesus'* resurrection. We don't carry around our baptismal identity like a driver's license, a social security card, or a passport so that we can prove we are who we say we are. Our identity is not something exterior to us, a label, a nametag. We live out our identity in the practice of resurrection.

Jesus' resurrection is the convincing proclamation in the country of Palestine and in recorded first-century Roman history that everything revealed in our Scriptures can be lived by flesh-and-blood men and women like us. Not just assented to as true, not just admired as art, not just acted out as in a dramatic performance, but *lived* in the ordinary conditions of home and workplace in all kinds of weather — just as Jesus, baptized by John in the Jordan River, did. We are able to spend our lives doing this because we are saints, raised from the dead to a resurrection life.

We continue to maintain this identity by keeping company with people who have firsthand knowledge of who we are: men and women blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, gathered

up — by God! These same people embarrass us with their haphazardness, exhilarate us with their joy, offend us by their inconsistent lives, comfort us with their compassion, bully and criticize us, encourage and bring the best out of us, bore us with their blandness, stimulate us with their enthusiasm. But we don't choose them. God chooses them. We keep company with the men and women God chooses. These saints.

"It is here. We are on it. It is under us."

A few years ago I was with some writer friends. We were reading some of our recent writings to one another. What I am writing here (and you are reading) was in embryo within me at the time. Then one of the friends, Robert Siegel, read a poem he had recently written. I was trying to find a way to provide imagery and clarity to this saint language in the Ephesian letter that I was having difficulty keeping in focus. When Robert finished reading the poem I knew it was just the poem for me. I knew I wanted to use it at this juncture as I deal with the end of Ephesians chapter 1.

Before reading the poem, Robert described the incident that had prepared for its making. He and his wife Anne live in New England. For years they had driven through an intersection where there was a posted sign to Mt. Monadnock, a name familiar to Robert from a poem by Emerson. But they had never followed the sign to the mountain. This day, Robert saw the sign but out of habit kept going. But then on impulse he said to Anne, "Isn't it about time we saw this famous mountain for ourselves?" He returned to the intersection and turned on to the road. Afterwards he wrote this poem. It gave me the exact image I was waiting for: "Looking for Mt. Monadnock."

We see the sign "Monadnock State Park"
as it flashes by, after a mile or two

decide to go back. "We can't pass by Monadnock
without seeing it," I say, turning around.

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4. Robert
p. 70.

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We head down the side road — “Monadnock Realty,”
“Monadnock Pottery,” “Monadnock Designs,”

but no Monadnock. Then the signs fall away —
nothing but trees and the darkening afternoon.

We don’t speak, pass a clearing, and you say,
“I think I saw it, or part of it — a bald rock?”

Miles and miles more. Finally, I pull over
and we consult a map. “Monadnock’s right there.”

“Or just back a bit there.” “But we should see it —
we’re practically on top of it.” And driving back

we look — trees, a flash of clearing, purple rock —
but we are, it seems, too close to see it:

It is here. We are on it. It is under us.⁴

* * *

This practice-resurrection life, this growing-up-in-Christ life, this Christian life that some people talk about and many others hear about, is a Mt. Monadnock kind of life. We read the words, we see the signs. We hear the talk, read the poems, sing the hymns, pray the prayers. We read the famous letter that the famous Paul wrote. We read Ephesians.

So we decide to take it seriously and see for ourselves, firsthand. We see the words *Christian, resurrection, saints* all over the place. We travel to holy places. We look through churches. But we never see what we expected to see. We never see the mountain. We read all the extravagant words, the rocket verbs, the gift nouns, the all-encompassing

4. Robert Siegel, *The Waters Under the Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), p. 70.

strategies, the grand purposes that are associated with this mountain. But we never see the mountain.

This is nothing new. It's been going on a long time. Most of the people who saw Jesus during those thirty years he lived in Palestine didn't see anything in him to write home about. Jesus: the eldest in a family of brothers and sisters growing up in small-town Nazareth, a working carpenter most of his life, came to a bad end, a common criminal dying on a cross. A few of the important people of the time noticed him only to dismiss him: King Herod Antipas, anticipating a show-and-tell miracle, was disappointed; Governor Pilate was puzzled but unimpressed; High Priest Caiaphas was contemptuous. In resurrection Jesus was still unimpressive: Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener; Cleopas and his friend walked seven miles with him without recognizing him, in conversation all the way. An interesting conversation, to be sure, but *God*? "We had no idea" — no idea that they were in conversation with the Savior of the world. For seven miles, walking with Jesus, discussing Holy Scriptures, they didn't know they were in conversation with the Word made flesh. Why didn't they get it? Maybe because they were preoccupied with more important things, spiritual things, Bible study. Then he picked up a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it open, and passed it around. Now with the texture of bread on their fingers, and the taste of bread on their tongues — grounded in the ordinary — they recognized him. Paul had to walk around blind for three days before he saw him.

Why do so many of us who see Jesus every day of the week never see him? Are we looking for Jesus walking on water, a cosmic light show, a charismatic circus, a transfiguration on Denali that we can take a picture of or use as a metaphor in a poem? "What went ye out for to see?" (Matt. 11:8 KJV).

Why doesn't Jesus advertise himself? If he wants to be known as God present with us, to heal and save and bless, why doesn't he get our attention and let us know pointblank what is going on? If all those verbs and nouns that Paul has spread out for us to consider and receive are the real thing, why doesn't Jesus at least raise his voice?

The short answer: God reveals himself in personal relationship

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and only in personal relationship. God is not a phenomenon to be considered. God is not a force to be used. God is not a proposition to be argued. There is nothing in or of God that is impersonal, nothing abstract, nothing imposed. And God treats us with an equivalent personal dignity. He isn't out to impress us. He's here to eat bread with us and receive us into his love just as we are, just where we are.

Resurrection is an immense and glorious mountain, all right — there is no exaggeration in Paul's verbs and nouns. But the practice of resurrection in which Paul engages us is not climbing the mountain. All the immensity and glory are under our feet. It's a Monadnock kind of mountain: "It is here. We are on it. It is under our feet."