

It's Complicated: Ancestors
Rev. Jamie Butcher

Every third Sunday in August, the Reedy clan meets at the White Top Mountain Community Center or Grayson Highlands State Park or maybe the Rugby Fire Department for the annual Decoration Day. You would be forgiven for thinking that Decoration Day is just another family reunion. There **is** a lot of family – branches of grand kids and great grands. There **is** a lot of food – folding tables piled high with chicken and dumplings, jello salads, and the traditional mountain stack cake. There **is** prayer and chatter – and pictures are taken of the original siblings who are still living. These are all scenes from the typical family reunion.

But what I learned in college was that the Reedy clan family reunions – my family reunions - were different. We visited our ancestor's graves. To drive up route 58 in late summer in the highlands of southwest Virginia is to pass by grave yard after grave yard decorated to the nines with manicured grass, trimmed corners, brightly colored flowers, plastic ones too, waving American flags, and the occasional necklace, coin or favorite food lovingly placed on the grave. Decoration Days were not your typical family reunion. They were a powerful way to honor and remember our ancestors.

There are cultures other than the Appalachian culture in which graves are ritually revisited and marked. The Day of the Dead being the best known. The Day of the Dead is a vibrant and colorful celebration that takes place in Mexico and other Latin American countries in early November. It is a time to honor and remember loved ones who have passed away. Families create elaborate displays adorned with photographs, favorite foods, and mementos of the deceased. Cemeteries are filled with marigolds, candles, and music as families gather to clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones. It is believed that during this time, the spirits of the departed return to be with their families.

Apparently, the burial tradition in Madagascar of the Malagasy people takes these grave visiting rituals to the next level. The Malagasy people open the tombs of their dead every few years and rewrap them in fresh burial clothes. And according to the Encyclopedia Britannica website, "Each time the dead get fresh wrappings, they also get a fresh dance near the tomb while music plays all around. This ritual—translated as the "turning of the bones"—is meant to speed up decomposition and push the spirit of the dead toward the afterlife" (Britannica.com)

There seems to be a natural human inclination – found across cultures – to celebrate and connect with our ancestors. And it turns out science is showing there are health benefits. Writing in the Guardian in before the pandemic, journalist Rebecca Hardy explores why children need to know their history, "Research showing that children who have a strong "family narrative" enjoy better emotional health. Much of this work is from the late 90s, when psychologists from Emory University, asked 48 families 20 questions about their family history. They found that the more the children knew, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.

"Hearing these stories gave the children a sense of their history and a strong 'intergenerational self'. Even if they were only nine, their identity stretched back 100 years, giving them

connection, strength and resilience,” he said. I wonder if the study found there were positive qualities grow exponentially if you had the regular practice of visiting graves.
(<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jan/14>)

So, when we approach the scripture for today isn't it surprising to see that one of our most important ancestors has no burial place?

Moses of course was a prophet unparalleled. Born during a time when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, Moses was saved as an infant when his mother placed him in a basket and set him adrift on the Nile River. He was discovered and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, growing up in the royal palace. As an adult, when Moses discovered his true identity as a Hebrew he felt compelled to fight for the freedom of his people. He killed an Egyptian who was mistreating Hebrew slaves and then fled to the land of Midian, where he found God in the form of a burning bush and was called to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of bondage. With God's guidance, Moses confronted Pharaoh and through a series of miraculous plagues, Pharaoh finally relented, and Moses led the Israelites on a journey through the wilderness towards the Promised Land.

The passage we read today is the end of Moses incredible life. He is 120 years old when he dies on top of Mt. Nebo. “Never since” says scripture, “has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.” Moses was a really big deal. So, what does it mean that scripture tells us there is no grave?

To be honest, I'm not totally sure. Scholars say different things. Could it be a deliberate act to prevent the Israelites from turning Moses' burial site into a place of idolatry or worship. Remember their struggle with the golden calf? Or maybe it was meant to encourage Joshua's leadership for this new iteration of the people in the world? Deuteronomy shares the weeping wraps up and the Spirit falls on Joshua. Or does the lack of burial shift the focus away from Moses earthly remains and towards his spiritual legacy? We hear echoes from the resurrection narrative. When Mary turns up at the tomb in Matthew, the visiting angel says, “Do not stand here at the grave and weep. He is not here. He has risen.” Certainly, one of our primary beliefs as Christians is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord is risen at work in the world.

I have to admit, my personal inclination is to revisit history. You may find me standing among the proverbial graves. Maybe you know this about me by now. There's hardly a sermon that doesn't touch on the cultural tradition of my past growing up in the mountains. I have been trained in family systems and have a degree in anthropology, so I often think about the past and how it impacts our presents and anticipate how past patterns might show up in our future.

I'm also wondering about those of you who may be feeling a bit like ancestors already. What does all this talk about graves and new things have to do with you who are hoping to lay down the ropes, rotate out of leadership, pass on programming and doing to enjoy your golden years?

Well, scripture asks us past-oriented people to flex different muscles, to anticipate the future with confidence that it is in God's hands, and not to stay in the past lingering at graves – even good, heroic, grounding ones. Even your own. Instead, we are to hope and to trust that Holy Spirit is alive and well in the world and beyond the grave.

This afternoon, I'm meeting with the Pastor Nominating Committee, we haven't met since they called me and I want to offer a state of the union sort of address. Here are all the wonderful ways we been a part of what God has going on here at Covenant. But importantly, I want to offer them ideas about the future that have been kicking around in my head, and we've been discussing with Session and staff. They are helping me flex my future muscles as we anticipate what is ahead for Covenant.

And we'll be doing this with you all too. We have baptisms on the horizons, Session approved an intern again. We have a new members' class coming up and are celebrating graduates soon. We'll be tackling a capital campaign for the HVAC, yes, but are having preliminary conversations about freshening things up in more visible ways too.

And guys, we received the grant! I thought they were going to tell us in May – but last week your prayers must have pushed the deadlines. We have the opportunity to learn from outstanding scholars from Candler School of Theology and churches like us from across denominations about what's next for young adults in the Christian faith. And the 100th anniversary of the building on Terrace and Peachtree is coming soon. There are many ways to celebrate 100 wonderful years at Covenant while keeping an eye on the future ahead. We have a lot to be proud of in our past but we trust God's future for Covenant too. For many reasons but basically because that is what we as people of faith are given to do.

Ancestors are important. We need to know our foundational stories and feel grounded by our roots. We need the witness of our holy texts and the direction of our ancient creeds. But our faith tradition tells us **DO NOT GET STUCK AT THE GRAVE**. The Lord is risen, and the Spirit is making all new things. May we trust in the promises of God and move into the future with hope for all that is to come. To God be the Glory. Time without End. Amen.