During my two decades as an Oregon pastor, a grateful resident of the abundant Willamette Valley, and a novice (though enthusiastic) gardener, I acquired a healthy respect for the exuberant vitality of vines. From the well-disciplined beauty and delectable productivity of the Willamette Valley vineyards, to the morning glory vines that volunteered delicate blue-sky trumpets in places they hadn’t been invited, to the wild blackberry vines whose advance was as impossible to halt as their fruit was impossible to resist, the valley’s vines were famous not only for their beauty and sweetness, but also for their tenacity and their intransigence.

Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that in the midst of dinner on one of the darkest nights of their lives—on the eve of his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion—Jesus reminds his disciples that they would do well to take a lesson from our verdant partners in creation. When Jesus meets their present crisis by invoking the example of the vines that have delighted and daunted us for generations, he was offering so much more than poetic platitudes or the cheap assurance that all would be well, by and by. Jesus wasn’t soothing his friends with promises of better days, nor coaching them to cling to the memories of happier times past: in fact, he rejects these familiar refuges of fair-weather faith. Instead, Jesus meets his friends’ fear of abandonment and failure with a sturdy assertion of God’s power and their own: “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Here, Jesus is not making a suggestion or issuing an invitation; rather, Jesus is proclaiming—that is, he is pro-actively claiming them as his own, as his home, as vital extensions of an indefatigable divine vine. He “abides” in them—that is, his life is their life, his vitality is their vitality, his power is their power, his love is their love. In first century Palestine, the idea that friends and family shared actual life and power in this very visceral way was commonplace. If you shared a meal with someone, accepted his hospitality, ate her bread and drank her wine, then your lives and your loyalty were bound together forever: you had consumed one another’s substance, mingled your spirits, and were responsible for
each other’s welfare. “Abide in me as I abide in you…” wasn’t an invitation to climb into Jesus’ lap and be comforted. Rather, it was a bracing reminder of who and whose these disciples were, of what they would become, and for whom: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. “

That Jesus’ disciples then and now should “abide” in resurrection’s own power—that we, like those verdant, vibrant vines, might sink our roots deep, stretch our branches far, and bear flowers and fruit with courage and tenacity—is our legacy and our true purpose. It is a promise already given; but one that is largely unheeded and unclaimed by the church, even after two thousand years of practice. We have built “abodes,” to be sure—empires and nations, denominations and congregations and buildings—we have secured our own survival and comforted ourselves with all the trappings of faithfulness. But all of our making and doing has not yet plumbed the deep meaning or true power of “abide”—which cannot be exhausted by our beliefs or confined in our buildings, because “abide” is not a noun, but a verb—an exuberant, intransigent, vine-like way of being, growing, living and loving every day. In the first eight verses of John 15, the word “abide” appears eight times, while the words “bear fruit” are repeated six times: the two are integrally connected. “Abiding” is not something we do for, or to, ourselves: “abiding” is living the risen life of Christ in every moment that is ours, in our hearts and homes, our communities and congregations, not for our own benefit or blessedness, but for the sole purpose of bearing fruit for the sake of the world God so loves.

What does it mean to “abide” in our times, to bear fruit for the sake of the world? Perhaps it means getting over ourselves—embracing the fact that we are not given to the world for our own enrichment, that we are not our own. Perhaps it means rooting ourselves confidently in the power of God’s love rather than shrinking in fear from one another. Perhaps it means escaping the pots and plots that have become too small for the vitality and vibrancy of the gospel, opening our church doors not only so that others might enter but that we might “branch out” into our neighborhoods and communities, blooming where we are not expected, reaching into untended lots and hearts with the sweet fruits of human solidarity and heavenly companionship, breaking out the bread and wine of the resurrection life and setting a table for all who cross our paths.

Questions to ponder

Whose are you, and to whom do you belong? Who or what is your vine, your rootedness, your identity? Where do your power and vitality come from?
What does it mean for you to “live Christ’s resurrection life” here and now?

What is your community hungry for?

What is the fruit you bear on behalf of the world?