

**Underground Hope**  
Matthew 13:31-33  
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Duke University Chapel  
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Imagine traveling only under the cover of night. Someone says, "You'll have to trust me. The next stop is 15 miles north, where you'll find rest and food." When you look around, all you can see are deep dark woods, and, if you're lucky, the immediate ground where you're walking. You know that those you left behind may never know what happens to you and the others. And then a sound startles in the distance and the pulse in your ears is deafening. The strange thing is that you have more hope right now than you've had in years, possibly your whole life. You're traveling the Underground Railroad out of slavery. You're going north toward freedom, but for the moment you're a fugitive slave. For the moment, you're hidden, buried in the path to freedom through the dark night and the woods and the help of others who point the way. For the foreseeable future you're underground – not literally of course – but you're underground in that you can't know what will happen to you on this journey, it is a long way to freedom *if* you make it, it is dark and very earthy. You are buried but you hope for life. Jesus tells us that underground is where the kingdom of heaven is to be found. He tells us the parable of the mustard seed.

A man holds a single mustard seed pinched tightly between his fingers because it is too risky to carry something so small in his palm. Feeling the smallness of this one grain pressing against his skin, he walks out into his field, across the rows, until he comes to the place where he sows that single seed. With his hand he makes a small opening the soil. Fresh earth the color of charcoal falls through his fingers and its dampness clings to his skin. He digs into the soil deep enough to bury the seed. He covers the seed with the dirt, knowing that it will remain unseen for quite some time before it puts forth a green shoot and longer still before it puts forth branches, but hoping that one day the birds of the air will come to nest there. So, says Matthew's Gospel, is the kingdom of heaven.

It's easy to slip into assuming we're the sower, to assume we're the ones searching for the perfect spot with the right sunlight and moisture and nutrients. But the hope of this parable is that we're not the sower - we're the mustard seed. Today's lesson - the parable of the mustard seed - is actually a lesson in burial. For those of us who want to live into God's new creation, it turns out that the dirt is a good starting place. The parable of the mustard seed is a lesson in how to be buried.

Imagine with me that you're *not* the man with the seed in hand but that you're the mustard seed yourself. What is it like to be a seed? It means not knowing what will emerge or when or how. All we know for sure is that there is dirt packed in around us, very little light, hopefully plenty of moisture, some smelly compost if we're lucky and eventually the faint stirrings of life. Seeds have a front row seat for an up-close view of the dirt. On good days we trust that this soil is full of what we need to be nourished while we wait. These days are spring with the promise of summer. But when the waiting seems unending, it seems we've been forgotten and there are no stirrings of life. The darkness of unknowing can be unbearable. Sometimes it seems that the dirt around us is only that. It's dirt. It's the mess and yuck of the world or the compost of our lives. We ask ourselves but are afraid to say aloud: How could hope come from this mess? These days are deep in the cold of winter. Sometimes giving our lives to the kingdom feels like a time of discernment or a time of waiting or a time of silent struggle. For example, the university is the soil where student seeds discover what to make of their underground time. The important thing to remember is that seeds find hope in two ways. The first way is getting underground, being buried in the earth. And the second is staying there, staying in the soil. If we want something good to emerge from our lives, if we want the flourishing of summer, it often comes from patient waiting in the obscurity of the ground through the winter.

Journey with me further into what it's like to be the seed. What is it like to be buried? There are a few options. Being buried means there are things we can't take underground with us. No one makes it very far along the path of discipleship before being faced with questions about what we are not willing to give up, what we are holding onto more tightly than we'd like others to know, what is our backup plan in case the kingdom gets a little too demanding. Take Mary the mother of Jesus: the kingdom asks her body to give birth to Jesus and her marriage to raise him and then her life and love to follow him as a disciple. There are comical accounts of saints who as a sign of their conversion reject clothing, like St. Francis abandoning his garments in public as an ultimate sign of giving everything over to God. Being buried underground means being willing to give over all we have to the kingdom: our life and love and dreams. But going underground isn't about disappearing and becoming invisible. Jesus isn't asking us to vanish into nothingness, but he is asking us to be content to live in a way doesn't relish gaining recognition and to live a life whose fruits well may be long-deferred.

Here's another possibility: Being buried can feel like having given your life to one devotion, or one love in a way that the rest of the world hardly notices. I think about a couple whose second child Susan became disabled at a very young age. I imagine there was some kind of underground conversation where the mother said, "How are we going to do this?" and then her husband said, "We're going to make living with Susan at home the most important thing in our lives, and trust that everything else will fit around that." So the parents structured their house to accommodate her at home. They arranged their jobs so to be able to trade off caring for her, not making nearly as much money as they would have otherwise but still enough to live on. Those closest to them knew how much re-arranging had been done but it surely isn't the kind of thing that is much recognized. Yet it touched absolutely everything in their lives.

Let's look at one more possibility: Being buried can also feel like giving yourself to one cause and knowing even if you worked all your life it wouldn't fix everything that's wrong. The Underground Railroad pointed people toward hope but still stopped short of ending slavery as an institution. Plenty of people were part of that but never saw the final fruit. Those whose homes were havens – stations, as they were called, along the way – rarely knew what happened to the people who passed through. And those who remained as slaves knew that some had managed to escape but slavery as an institution persisted. For decades, lives were lost on the Underground Railroad while slavery remained in full force. Escaped slaves died and those leading them died in pursuit of freedom. But that didn't stop men and women from giving their lives to it as a sign of hope. I am sure you know people who have given their life to a cause knowing they might never see its full fruition in their lifetime, but nonetheless press ahead wholeheartedly even when their efforts are hidden or seemingly futile.

Being buried recognizes that there is a good way of putting something else before ourselves, especially if it is a kingdom-infused pursuit. There is a way that we can be hidden for the kingdom. Being hidden for the kingdom means we don't worry about vanishing or disappearing because it is a way of saying to ourselves and to one another that our greatest hope is to become more and more like Jesus.

Our ultimate lesson in burial comes from Jesus. He was the seed more glorious than all others because he was buried in order to give life. Jesus is the mustard seed sown by God into the earth. God the Father buries God the Son as the mustard seed among us, the dust of the earth. His birth was a kind of burial in Bethlehem. Only a couple of people were there. And his death was a burial at Golgotha. Again, only a couple of people were there at his end. He lived in a very inconspicuous place and while he lived people wondered how and when and where the new life would emerge. It was not the kingdom of domination and strength that they imagined. Jesus' entire life here was a buried seed that brought forth the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' life is all about the journey from the obscurity of being underground that leads to the

joyful hope of resurrection. The particular transformation we find in Jesus - from hidden obscurity to flourishing life - is the way that God has chosen to give hope to the world.

The mustard seed of Jesus goes into the earth and comes back out as a tree where the birds of the air find a home. This tree of salvation is our resting place in God's kingdom now and forever. A few chapters earlier in Matthew 6 Jesus promises, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Because a single seed has been sown for us and for our salvation, we can have hope that our being hidden, our burial, and our time underground will offer life or hope or rest to others. We join in God's kingdom by being a seed in the way that Jesus was a seed. I call it *underground hope*. It's the hope that lies buried quietly through incomprehensible darkness and the mess and yuck of the dirt. It's the hope that waits through anxious incompleteness and long-delayed fruition. It's the hope that fueled men and women on the Underground Railroad. It's the hope that sustains all who persevere in giving all we have and all we are to the kingdom.

Christians are people of underground hope. We put all our hope in Jesus' burial among us, and we know that our transformation starts with being buried ourselves. Traditionally the church has seen baptism as such a burial, a death with the promise of life. It is the most subversive hope we could have. So let's take one more look underground. Let's take one more look at the mustard seed that Jesus cares so much about.

First think about yourself as the seed. Where do you sense a buried seed? Where in the messiness and dirt around you might you look to see if God has buried a hope? Is there a stirring of new life somewhere that might be God nudging you in the way of the kingdom?

Then think about someone else you know. Do you know someone who feels buried yet you have seen the kingdom hidden in their life? Do you know someone who has given themselves to a kingdom-inspired dream? Do you know someone who has given of themselves, maybe more than they had to give, in the hope of giving life to others? Is there someone whose life inspires you to give all you are to God's kingdom?

What is the underground hope God has given to you?