



February 22, 2013

Greetings in the Spirit of Christ,

This past weekend, the first Sunday of Lent, after 25 years living in the state of Texas, I finally spent some time in what most people outside the state think of when they think of Texas – broad expanses of desert ranchland. (Texas also boasts pine forests, towering mountains, rolling hills, a gulf coast and cypress bayous, but that's another story.) In particular, along with my wife and a couple of wilderness-loving friends, I spent time hiking in the borderlands near Del Río, TX. Among other things, we explored pictographs left by indigenous people who lived there over 4,000 years ago.

"Lived there" – what an astonishing statement! If you have ever spent any time in a desert, even one that is not devoid of vegetation, two things strike you. First, you can't imagine how anyone or anything could "live there" – how anyone could survive in such a harsh climate so seemingly devoid of life – and second, after a time, you become aware of the startling, inspiring, abundant life all around you. Ironical? I should say so.

Succulent plants and other species specially adapted to that climate demonstrate their persistent, even defiant viability at every turn; ocotillos budding out and showing off their bright red flowers, prickly pear cactus sprouting their yellow and red edible fruit, yucca plants sending up ridiculously tall flowering stalks full of flowers – very dramatic stuff.

If nothing else, the desert is rife with metaphors. Take the resurrection plant. What a great name. When dormant, this plant resembles nothing so much as a dirty, gray, shredded rag lying on the desert floor. After a little bit of rain, it opens. Turns green and looks a little like a happy cabbage plant. Resurrection indeed.

I think that one of the things that makes desert life so remarkable is not only its otherwise harsh environment, but that in a place where so few things exist, those that do really stand out. As observers, when we are free from the distractions of a landscape overwhelmed with living things, we are drawn to the rare examples of life present in front of us.

One of the most fruitful aspects of "giving something up for Lent" is not earning a few points on the celestial worthiness scoreboard (God save us!), but the removal of distractions. Distractions that rob us of the perspective we need to see what is essential, what is vital, what connects us to mystery. For me, solitary exercise, time in nature, quiet reflection and recently, an actual desert, have afforded me the opportunity to be sufficiently free of distractions to encounter the eternal immeasurably better than giving up chocolate ever did. So, take a risk. Enter the desert. Resurrection awaits.

Mark Whittier