

Jesus Christ the apple tree

By [Glenn Mitchell](#)

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I recently purchased the 1800s' homestead where I've lived for the past five years, and I'm busy renovating the house and outbuildings. There are a few old apple trees on the three-and-a-half acre property, my favorite of which sends forth green every year from a trunk that appears 90 percent dead. This seems a ripe metaphor for my place and the [new life](#) I'm experiencing here.

My friend Max brought me an apple tree the other week—a [Spitzenburg](#), Thomas Jefferson's favorite variety, purchased at Monticello. Delighted, I went out that afternoon to plant it. I quickly decided on a level and open place near an outbuilding I am fixing up to be my wood shop. My property is rather wet, but I knew this spot to be dry. I set the potted tree down and began to dig.

I quickly found reason for the dryness: rocks, lots of rocks. Every time I drove the shovel down it clanged on stone. I walked to the tool shed and got my digging iron, a beast of a bar used to work through rocky soil. I soon realized that I'd probably picked the stoniest place on the whole property.

About a foot down it was apparent that this hole wasn't about a few stones—I was digging in a place that was *mostly* stone. It was a hot day, and I was soon drenched. I settled into a rhythm: I'd loosen a large stone with the bar and then get down on my knees and wrestle the stone out of the hole. I stopped and looked around. I knew where the old house foundation was, and following the lay of the land, I began to see that I was probably digging through what at one time had been the foundation of a barn floor.

I kept digging. An old adage says "Make a hundred-dollar hole for a \$10 tree"; I realized that I was digging a thousand-dollar hole for a \$35 tree. I began to stack the stones beside the hole in pyramid fashion, one hard-won stone on top of another. The stones dwarfed the small pile of soil beside them, and by the end, three and a half hours later, the stone pile was about as high as the tree. It took five

wheelbarrow loads of soil and compost to fill in the hole where all those stones had been. I was finished.

The next morning, a little stiff and sore, I walked out as the sun was rising and looked at my sweet Spitzenburg. I took in its slender trunk stretching up out from the graft on the rootstock. I looked at the graceful curve of the lower branches and pictured someday a swing dangling from the horizontal branch reaching toward the wood shop. I gazed gently at the green of the leaves and the way they claimed that ancient space for life. In that moment the apple tree greened something in me, some shoot of newness springing from the old stock that is my life.

The point of all the digging, all the toil and the sweat, is not the pile of stones—as tall as it is and as much as it marked my path of planting. The point is the presence of the apple tree growing green beside it. So often when we look to the call narratives we see the suffering and miss the joining with, the presence, that is knit to the experience of following. [We hear “death” in the text and miss the life](#) right in front of us.

Jesus isn't training martyrs here but rather those who can follow him into life. Along the way we bear what suffering comes, we raise the heavy stones to the light of day. But the movement is into the green of life, toward the fruit of [the tree](#).

Additional lectionary columns by Mitchell appear in the September 8 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.