

Easter and Earth Day

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When I was a pre-med student a long time ago, one of my biology professors was lecturing on the deteriorating state of the environment. This was back in the late 1970s or early 1980s, at the beginning of our generation's culture wars, when anti-gay evangelicals and anti-abortion Catholics found common cause to try to make America moral again, according to their morality.

My biology professor was not given to wading into the morass of politics, but on this occasion, as he described, with scientific precision, the poisoned air, the disappearing forests, the vanishing species, and the growing dead spots in the oceans, he concluded his lecture with an oblique reference to the environmental nay-sayers by saying, "If we don't sort out this problem, and sort it out soon, none of our other problems will matter."

This coming Wednesday is Earth Day. And the next Wednesday will be Earth Day. And the Wednesday after that will be Earth Day, too. All the Wednesdays in whatever future we have left on planet Earth will be Earth Day, along with all the Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Every day is Earth Day on planet Earth, and every day since the Earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago has been Earth Day. We don't have to recognize Earth Day for it to be Earth Day, and for too many centuries – millennia, even – we have not.

The same is true of what was called Creation Sunday in one of my previous congregations, or the Sunday next before Earth Day, which is today. This Sunday belongs to Creation, just as last Sunday did and next Sunday will. The day belongs to Creation, we belong to Creation, and Creation belongs to God. I wonder why we have such trouble bearing that in mind as we

go about our daily lives, making unmindful decisions that are disastrously destructive to the earth and disastrously self-destructive?

Quite by accident, it has become my custom here to conclude our welcome to worship by quoting from Psalm 118, “This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice . . .”

That is my invitation to you and our invitation to our guests and a reminder to ourselves to step back for a time from the relentless bad news that is the staple of the American media business model.

Another day – this day, any day – is another call to gratitude and joy, and another opportunity to worship the God who provides all of it – the day, the joy, the gratitude, the worship, and us. We are part of all of that, and to rejoice and be glad anytime anywhere is to do so in creation. We have no

choice in this world. We are creatures of God's creating – always have been, always will be – and the whole point of Easter is to allow us to live that new and abundant life promised us by Jesus in this world, this world of the fair meadows, sunshine, and moonlight of which we just sang. Earth Day is an opportunity for us to recognize another of those alignments of sacred and secular values, and we are blessed in churches like this one to rejoice and be glad in it.

Except for Creation Sunday – which is a thing in only a relative handful of nuts-and-berries, crunchy-granola, tree-hugging, sandal-wearing progressive-type churches today – we Christian folk always seem to leave Creation out of our relationship with God. I guess we do that because Jesus told us that God is Spirit, as though Spirit and Creation were different.

You could certainly think that by reading the opening verses of Genesis in a certain way. The Spirit of God moved over the face of the deep and brought forth light and land and plants and us. God's Spirit is up there, we say, in heaven, running things down here, in Creation, we say, like a marionettist controls a marionette. Spirit and Creation certainly look different in this kind of reading.

But that's not the only way to read Genesis, maybe it's not the best way, and perhaps we're beginning to realize that it may actually a pretty awful way to read our account of creation. The deficiencies of reading Genesis that way is one of the reasons our denomination invented a commitment called Earth Care Congregations, which, as you heard earlier from Dave, we are. We are also a Matthew 25 Congregation, and Easter brings those two important commitments together in its

assertion that the love of God's world embodied in Jesus is the most powerful force in all creation, including death itself. God raised Jesus from old death to new life so that we might share in his eternal life of self-sacrificial love – that is, loving God above all else, and loving God's creation, embodied in our neighbors, as we love creation embodied in ourselves.

God's Spirit – or breath or wind, since those are all the same Hebrew word – is less like a puppeteer and more like the air inside a balloon, causing the balloon to inflate, to become eye-catching and captivating, to become what it was intended to be. Every balloon is intended to be full of breath, wind – *ruach*, animating life force – and that force has to be inside of, rather than outside of, in order for it to make the thing itself.

What if that is actually what the Holy Spirit does – makes things what they are truly meant to be, including us, from the inside out?

Isn't that one of the implications of Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel when he said that it isn't what goes into us that defiles us, but rather what comes out of us? Isn't our identity – for better and for worse, purely or profanely – seen and known and dependent on what comes out of us – our speech, our actions, our priorities, our neglects, our habits, our patterns of behavior?

Jesus was Jewish – we'll learn more about that in my upcoming course – and Judaism has historically focused on right action – orthopraxy – rather than right belief – orthodoxy, which is what we Christians get so wound up about. Churches like this one – where actions matter a great deal more than

words – are the exception in Christian history, which has devoted far too much attention to words and far too little attention to actions. That imbalance is one of the reasons Christians have committed such atrocities as forcing Jews to convert to Christianity, enslaving people all around the globe, and rushing to line up behind dictators and tyrants in massive numbers.

The opening words of John's Gospel tell us that not one thing came into being without the eternal, uncreated Word of God, and for us, that divine Word always takes specific form in a particular moment and in a particular place. We look for abstractions, generalities, principles, and universals, but the Word of God always takes place *in* place and *in* time. There may be, as Plato suggested, a heavenly form called daffodil, but you and I only experience daffodils, each one unique and

unrepeatable. And each one of those daffodils, like every other thing, is an incarnation of the Word of God, just as Jesus the Christ was. And Easter reminds us that the way Jesus was a Human One – fully transparent to the divine, fully transmitting the divine logos, fully embodying divine love – that way of life is not defined or determined by death. That's what resurrection is all about.

The late poet Brian Doyle recounts in one of his poems seeing a squirrel get run over by a car. By any reckoning, the squirrel should have been killed, as Doyle writes:

You want to hear a resurrection story? I'll tell you
A resurrection story. I saw a squirrel get squished
In the street. This was on Ash Street, near where a
Family named Penance lives. Things like this rivet

Me. Religions don't live in churches. Religions are
Not about religion, in the end; they're vocabularies.
This squirrel got *hammered*. I mean, a car ran right
Over it, and the car sped down the hill, and I recall
Thinking that some dog would soon be delighted to
Be rolling ecstatically in squirrel oil . . .

But to Doyle's surprise, the squirrel survived its close
encounter of the mortal kind, which made Doyle wonder if
others we know of who've encountered death up close had
similar experiences. Doyle continues:

But then, even

As I watched, the animal resumed its original shape

And staggered off into the laurel thicket, inarguably

Alive and mobile, if somewhat rattled and unkempt.
Jesus and Lazarus must have known that feeling, of
Being sore in every joint, and utterly totally fixated
On a shower and coffee and a sandwich. Or walnuts,
Depending, I suppose, on the species. Our current form
Is a nebulous idea, is what I am trying to say.

Doyle concludes his poem by wondering if we've been
understanding resurrection too narrowly, too focused on Rabbi
Jesus and not enough on the Word of God without whom not
one thing came into being; Doyle concludes:

Could

It be that resurrections are normal and the one we're

Always going on about in the Christian mythologies

Is only One a long time ago, when there are millions
Per day? Could there be an insect Jesus and a badger
Jesus and a salmon Jesus? Could there be impossible
Zillions of Jesuses? Isn't that really the whole point?

Could there be a badger Jesus or a daffodil Jesus or a Kylie
Evans Jesus or a Dave Neff Jesus? With considerable help from
the church, have we Christians closed our minds to the many
realities of God's ways with the world, thereby depriving
ourselves of the insight, wisdom, strength, and comfort of
Easter?

My text is the twenty-seventh verse of the twenty-fourth
chapter of the Gospel of Luke: "Then beginning with Moses
and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about
himself in all the scriptures."

The resurrected Jesus Christ opened the hearts and minds of those two disciples walking to Emmaus, showing them how the catastrophe through which they had just lived was not the end of their leader or their hope, but rather was the opening movement in an eschatological symphony. Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for, and he bore within himself the world to come they had been looking for, but their minds needed to be opened and their hearts needed to be “strangely warmed,” as John Wesley put it, to experience what was actually happening.

So do ours. On this Creation Sunday, our closed minds need to be opened by the risen Jesus Christ to what’s happening around us: the rising seas, the disappearing forests, the choking garbage, our out-of-control population. The global pandemic of less than half a decade ago holds lessons for those

willing to be taught – every day holds such lessons – but unless we’re willing to allow our minds to be opened by Easter – by that unexpected, inexplicable burst of transcendent love and joy – we have little hope of solving that problem of earth’s destruction that makes all of our other problems moot.

“Christ plays in ten thousand places,” Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in 1881, beseeching his Victorian peers to open their minds to all the ways the Word of God is incarnate in “mortal things” – kingfishers, dragonflies, water, stones, even the clapper of a bell.

Easter is the Great Interruption of our business-as-usual world, through which we sleepwalk with closed eyes and drowsy minds and calloused hearts. In Easter, God asks us to open our whole selves to the undying love that cannot be crucified, cannot be sealed away, and cannot be denied. That

undying love first made itself known to the world long before we got here – sweeping creation into being – and that love will be here long after we’re gone – in that new heaven and new earth envisioned by ancient prophets.

We Christians are foolishly anthropocentric to think that God’s love is just for us humans. The Bible’s most famous verse says otherwise: “For God so loved the world” – not people, not Christians, the world, all of it, no exceptions. I keep hoping that all of those red-hot evangelical Christians holding up those signs for the cameras at sporting events will take a more capacious view of their own scriptures and their own religion.

I want to close by taking us a step further into the eschatological symphony that began at Easter and into the identity of this church as both a Matthew 25 Congregation and an Earth Care Congregation.

The second half of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is Jesus's description of the final judgment. It's that famous sorting of the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent those destined for eternal life, while the goats represent the damned.

What has always struck me about this depiction of the criteria by which our lives are ultimately judged is how empty it is of doctrine, ideas and words that we have invented and claim come from God. There isn't a word in the final judgment about what the blessed believe about Jesus or think about baptism or do when a bishop speaks. None of that doctrine to which we Christians, across the spectrum, have attached so much importance.

Instead, Matthew 25 is about human beings using Creation as God intended for Creation to be used: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and showing up for the

stranger. In the final analysis, what matters most, according to Jesus, is not what we think, even when we call those thoughts beliefs; what matters is how we interact with Creation – respecting it, stewarding it, enjoying it, and sharing it – to the benefit of *all* of God’s Beloved Community, not just the human members. As Emma reminded us in the call to worship, the earth is the Lord’s, not just the people on it. And those words from Psalm 24 are a powerful reminder that every day is Earth Day.