

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter April 26, 2009
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-7

Psalm 4

Luke 24:36b-48

Finding Communion with Creation

An Episcopal bishop named Mark Macdonald tells a wonderful story about leading worship in a congregation in the middle of Navajo Nation. It was Easter morning, and when the time came to read the Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection, Bishop Macdonald stood up and began reading in Navajo: "It was early in the morning..." Almost before the words were out of his mouth, "the oldest person there, an elder who understood no English, said loudly (in Navajo), 'Yes!'"

Macdonald thought "it seemed a little early in the narrative for this much enthusiasm," so he assumed he had made a mistake -- maybe he had mispronounced the words in Navajo. So he tried again: "It was early in the morning..." This time he heard an even louder and more enthusiastic *Yes*. After Communion, the bishop went up to one of the lay leaders and asked if he had pronounced the words correctly. Oh, she said, looking surprised, of course. Well, asked the bishop, then why was the older woman so excited? Oh, he was told, "The early dawn is the most important part of the day to her. Father Sky and Mother Earth meet at that time and produce all that is necessary for life. It is the holiest time of the day. Jesus would pick that good time of day to be raised."¹

Bishop Macdonald comments that while the early dawn is certainly the best time for new life, he had never thought about the possibility that this "observation about the physical word could be theologically and spiritually revealing, that it suggested a communion between God, humanity, and creation that is fundamental to our... existence." It took him a while to absorb this. He writes: "An elder with no formal schooling had repositioned

¹ Mark Macdonald, "Finding Communion with Creation," in *Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation*, edited by Lyndsay Moseley and the staff of Sierra Club Books, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2008, pp. 150-151. Macdonald is the former bishop of Alaska and now the pastoral bishop of the Episcopal Church of Navajoland.

the central narrative of my life firmly within the physical world and all its forces and interactions. It was,” he says, “an ecological reading of a story that, for me, had been trapped inside a flat virtual world misnamed ‘spiritual’.”

Today on Creation Sunday, the finale of Earth Day and Earth Week, we celebrate the sacred power of the natural world. Like Bishop Macdonald, today we remember and re-claim what he calls “a primal, long-ignored layer of spiritual consciousness that [is] also an ecological consciousness.”²

I don’t know about you, but I grew up thinking of “spirituality” as completely ethereal. The God I grew up with had no body. Being a good Christian was all about distancing oneself from the body and transcending the body -- both one’s own body and the “body” of the natural world. The natural world and its diversity of buzzing, blooming, finned, and feathered creatures was essentially irrelevant and dispensable, only the backdrop to what was really important: human beings. Since the time of the Reformation, Christianity -- at least in the West -- has had little to say about the salvation of the natural world and the cosmos, as if only one species, *Homo sapiens*, is of any real interest to God.

So what a healing it is, what a restoration of the ancient biblical understanding -- an understanding that has never been forgotten by the indigenous people of the land -- to know that the Earth is holy. Its creatures are holy. The whole created world is lit up with the power and presence of God.

Our Gospel story this morning is full of meanings, but surely one of them is that the Risen Christ is alive in the body, in our bodies, in the body of the Earth. “When the disciples were telling how they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost” [Luke 24:]. But Jesus comes not as a ghost. He comes not as a memory, nor as an idea, nor as something from “a flat, virtual world misnamed ‘spiritual’.” He comes as a living body, a body made of flesh and bones that can touch and be touched, a body that can feel hunger and thirst and that wants to know, “Hey, isn’t there anything to eat around here?” The Messiah suffers, dies, and rises *as a body*, and that must tell us something

² Ibid, p. 151.

about how much God loves the body and wants to meet us in and through the body – through our bodily senses of sight and sound, through taste and touch and smell. Scripture tells us that for forty days the disciples met the living Christ through his risen body. And then, when he ascended into heaven, Jesus’ body withdrew from the disciples’ sight, so that his living presence could fill all things and so that all of us can touch and see him, if our eyes are opened.

What this means is that when you and I go out into nature, when we let our minds grow quiet and we simply gaze at the river or the blooming magnolia or the slopes of the Holyoke Range coming back to life as the first soft leaves of Spring unfold, when we gaze with a quiet eye, not grasping for anything and not pushing anything away, we begin to perceive that a holy, living presence fills everything we see. Wherever we gaze, the Risen Christ is gazing back at us and his presence is flowing toward us. “Peace be with you,” he is saying to us through hawk and wind, through tree and cloud and stars. “Peace be with you. I am here in the needles of the pine tree beside you that flutter in the breeze, and in the bark overlaid with clumps of lichen, each one a tiny galaxy. I am here in the ocean waves that form and dissolve on the shore, in the sand under your bare feet, in the sea gull that is crying overhead. Peace be with you. I am here, and you are part of this with me, and you are witnesses of these things.”

When our inward sight is restored, and our eyes are opened, as today’s Collect says, to behold Christ in all his redeeming work, the Earth comes alive and we perceive Christ revealing himself in every sound we hear, in every handful of dirt that we hold and in every bird we see.

This morning I brought in an icon of the Risen Christ that usually hangs in my office.³ The icon imagines Christ as a Native American figure whose body shines out from every habitat and every creature – from the sky above to the water below, from mountains, field and buffalo. The God who created all things also redeems all things and fills all things. Through the crucified and risen Christ, divine love has woven together the human and natural worlds into one inter-related whole.

I know that some of you have gone to great lengths to make today a carpool or car-free Sunday. Some of you have already told me about the

³ “Mystic Christ,” by Fr. John Giuliani, Bridge Building Images, Inc. (www.BridgeBuilding.com)

efforts you made to reduce your carbon footprint this morning. I am delighted, and I look forward to hearing more stories, especially during the Forum today after the 10:30 service, when a local eco-activist, Tina Clarke, will speak to us about Transition Towns, a new movement taking hold in the United Kingdom and now reaching the U.S., to re-imagine and re-design our urban communities so that they are less dependent on oil and more environmentally sustainable.⁴

Why do we go to this kind of trouble to cut back our use of fossil fuels? Maybe it is partly social pressure, but obviously it is a lot more than that. If you are like me, sometimes we take action out of fear. And with good reason -- the news from climate scientists is increasingly scary. Sometimes we take action out of anger, anger because the poor -- as always -- are the people most threatened by climate change and will suffer most from its effects, anger because greed and carelessness and inertia are stealing a habitable Earth from our children and our children's children. Or maybe it is sorrow that pushes us to act -- a piercing grief at how much has been lost, at the species that are likely to go extinct, the massive glaciers and healthy coral reefs that our children will never see. Fear, anger, sorrow -- all these can galvanize us to act.

But stirring beneath them all is love, love for each other, love for the Earth entrusted to our care, love for the God whose mercies cannot be numbered. We were made for communion with God and each other and God's Creation, and it is communion that we feel when we gaze in silent awe at the sparkling river or the distant stars, and Communion that we celebrate every Sunday. When the celebrant lifts up the bread and the wine at the Eucharist, the whole Creation is lifted up. When the celebrant blesses the bread and wine, the whole Creation is blessed. Christ comes to us in the consecrated bread and wine, and in the grain that was formed into bread and the grapes that were pressed into wine. Christ comes to us in the sunshine that warmed the grapes and the grain, in the rainfall that watered their roots, in the hands that tended them, and pruned and harvested them. Christ comes to us in the very ground in which the seeds of grain and grape were planted, for the risen Christ is alive in every part of Creation, offering us healing, offering us blessing. In the strength of this blessed and broken bread, and of this blessed and poured-out wine, we dare to hope that human beings will

⁴ See <http://www.transitiontowns.org/> The Forum never did take place today, but we hope to reschedule.

find a way to respond with grateful hearts, and to become who were made to be, a blessing on the Earth.