

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter (Earth Day/Creation Sunday)

May 1, 2011

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

Psalms 16

John 20:19-31

Hands-on faith

“[Jesus] said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’” John 20:27

“Glory,” I kept murmuring the other day as I jogged down the hill behind Smith College. Trees were bursting into leaf; magnolia and forsythia were in full bloom; birdsong filled my ears; and I was inhaling the season’s first scent of cut grass. The sky was blue, the winter was over, and all I could say was “Glory, glory, glory.”

Earth Day fell on Good Friday this year, and rather than celebrate Creation Sunday on Easter morning, we decided to honor it today, on the Second Sunday of Easter. Now is our chance to give thanks for God’s Creation and to rejoice in the holy radiance that shines in every wild and quirky creature, in every branch and blossom, in every chipmunk and bumblebee. Sometimes, when I stand in a field somewhere and gaze at the Holyoke Range, or when I watch sunlight and shadow play across the Connecticut River, I feel what I imagine the disciples felt when they announced to Thomas with such joy and surprise, “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:24).

Maybe it is sheer sentimentality that makes us respond so deeply to the beauty of the world, but I don’t think so. Years ago, former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple pointed out that we live in a sacramental universe, for the created world is like the sacrament of Baptism or Communion -- it discloses the presence of God. William Temple’s insight is entirely orthodox, for Christians as far back as Irenaeus and on to Augustine, Aquinas, and Teilhard de Chardin perceived the whole universe as being the image of God.¹ That experience is what invites us in every Eucharist to turn to our Creator and proclaim, “Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”

¹ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, p. 110.

So isn't it interesting that the risen Jesus came back for a time in a body? He didn't just vanish into thin air, into some ethereal, disembodied realm of light, but instead came back first in the flesh, as if to say: look for me right here, in the body of this world. Look for me here in your ordinary lives, here in the sights, sounds, and smells, the tastes and touch of the world. Here is where you will find me, for I am everywhere present. The created world is good -- so says Scripture all the way back to Genesis. What is holy and what is natural, what is divine and what is physical -- these apparent opposites have been embraced and interwoven in the incarnation of Christ, and all of it shines with God's glory. As Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27). Sometimes the best way to make contact with the divine is not to worry about abstractions and mental constructs, about what we believe or do not believe, but rather to reach out, as Thomas was invited to do -- to make conscious contact, to discover the living God in the here and now, in the gift of this moment, in the flesh of the world, in the flesh of our daily lives.

Yet if the whole creation is radiant with the risen Christ, how much suffering the part of the universe that was entrusted to us, planet earth, is now enduring! The earth itself is being nailed to the cross. We learn about its wounds every day, from the BP oil rig explosion a year ago, that led to the largest accidental oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry, to the ongoing nuclear crisis in Japan, where radioactive particles have been released into the sea and air, and where workers are apparently still locked in a desperate struggle to prevent total meltdown. This week the South and Midwest experienced an extraordinary series of tornadoes, the worst tornado season in decades, and our hearts go out to all those who in the course of a few terrifying days lost their loved ones, their livelihood, their homes, or their lives.

Were those record tornados related to global warming? Meteorologists seem to be split on the question, with most saying no, and some saying that the unusually warm waters of the Gulf contributed to the tornadoes' power. Of course, no particular tornado, flood, drought, hurricane, or any other extreme weather event can be directly attributed to human-caused climate change. But it is clear that the earth's temperature is not only rising, but rising increasingly fast. Nine of the ten warmest years occurred in the last decade. 2010 tied 2005 as the hottest year in 131 years of recordkeeping. Last year 19 countries endured unprecedented heat. Temperatures in Burma reached 117 degrees Fahrenheit, setting a record for Southeast Asia, while the ancient city of Mohenjo-daro in

Pakistan hit 128.3 degrees Fahrenheit -- a record not only for the country but for all of Asia, and the fourth hottest temperature ever recorded anywhere.²

How serious is the threat to God's creation? Here is what one mainstream environmental lawyer, Gus Speth, has to say: "...all we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and [organisms] and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy. Just continue to release greenhouse gases at current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in. But, of course, human activities are not holding at current levels -- they are accelerating, dramatically."³

Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27). Are we willing to reach out our hands and to touch the wounds of creation? Are we willing to make contact with the pain of the earth? It is so tempting to turn away -- maybe to catch up on email or pour a drink or clean the basement, anything that keeps us from looking directly and carefully at the destruction going on around us. We do need to take breaks; we do need to take care of business; but we also need to embark on a personal and social transformation that will enable human beings to live more lightly on the earth.

The good news is that the risen Christ is with us as we face and touch the wounds. As a contemporary theologian, Richard Rohr, has put it, "The fact that [Jesus] returns to embodiment tells us that salvation is first of all in this world, and embodiment is good. [Jesus] meets the disciples back at their jobs, the women in their very human grief, with friends for breakfast, with two [people] walking along a road, and first of all to a very human friend, Mary of Magdala. He does not leave this world. He re-enters this world *as it is* and reveals its radiance."⁴

It is clear to me that once we perceive the radiance of the world, we receive the motivation and the courage to protect it. Just as Jesus breathed his

² < http://www.earth-policy.org/indicators/C51/temperature_2011 >. Facts in this paragraph are from research posted by Lester R. Brown's Earth Policy Institute.

³ James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge on the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. x (Preface).

⁴ Richard Rohr, adapted from *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, p. 150, day 159, sent by email.

Spirit into the disciples on the day of Resurrection, so he breathes his Spirit into us, and with each conscious breath we draw in more deeply the presence and the power of God. Who knows what will be possible when we Christians awaken to the power that sleeps within us, and when we realize that our breath and words and hands can convey the reconciling, healing, and liberating love of God?

Traditionally during Lent and Holy Week we pray with the Stations of the Cross. Now that it is Easter, I have set up a small display for coffee hour that I'm calling "Stations of Creation." On the table in the Connector you will find several ways to express your care for God's good earth. I hope that you will start by signing a letter to Senator Scott Brown that will be hand-delivered to him on Wednesday by our friends at Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light. Last year the Senate failed to pass a comprehensive climate and energy bill, so we are counting on the EPA to carry out its responsibility under the Clean Air Act to reduce the emissions that cause climate change. Let's encourage Senator Brown to protect the EPA, and let's applaud his commitment to create jobs in Massachusetts, for by shifting from fossil to renewable energy, we will not only tackle climate change but also generate new jobs.

You might want to sign a postcard asking State Senator Stan Rosenberg to support the updated bottle bill, which would expand the bottle bill -- the 5-cent deposit that we pay on some beverages to encourage recycling -- to include non-carbonated drinks such as water, juices, and sports drinks.

Or maybe you'll want to pick up material about the Hitchcock Center for the Environment, our local center for environmental education, or to sign a postcard to the Governor urging him to close the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant. Or maybe you'll pick up an application for a low-cost share of fresh vegetables from a new local farm in Northampton.

If you are a resident of Amherst, I hope you will make a plan to contact your Town Meeting members and ask them to vote for the "stretch code" at the May Town Meeting, which begins tomorrow night. Once Amherst passes the "stretch energy code," we will become a so-called "Green Community" and therefore eligible to apply for state grants to fund energy-efficiency improvements.

After that, step outside and learn a few things from Mary Hocken about a skill that still eludes me: how to create a robust compost pile. It is a great time of year to get our hands back in the dirt!

"Reach out your hand," Jesus says to Thomas and to all of us. There is so much healing that we can do, so much power to reconcile that God has given to us, so much life that we can help to bring forth. The risen Christ is among us and beside us and within us. Do not doubt, but believe.