

New Birth to Climate Action: This is Not a Test

April 19, 2020

How did you first awaken to nature—as something you needed to care about? Was it scouting or camping, maybe? I've talked with you before about my experiences at Gardner Dam camp—including a 50-mile hike through the Nicolet National Forest that woke me up to the awe and beauty and potential terror of the Earth we inhabit. A Wisconsin thunderstorm at night with nothing but a tarp to protect you is literally an awakening experience.

Or was it a family vacation? Lisa and I took a few trips with our children that were more or less like the ones parodied in the National Lampoon vacation series of movies. On one of these trips in our metallic pea conversion van we stopped in the Pisgah National Forest of North Carolina on the way home from an April trip to Florida. Our destination was Sliding Rock—a natural water slide. There were still icicles in the higher elevations, so when the boys and I actually slid down the steep and slippery incline to the deep pool at the bottom it was teeth-chattering COLD! Lisa and Rheanne sat that one out.

But what really clinched it for my appreciation of the awe of nature was a camping trip to High Cliff State Park a few years back with my brother David and his family. They had a pop-up trailer. We had a tent. After a great meal over a hot fire, including of course S'mores at the end, we hunkered down in the tent—all five of us in our sleeping bags, and fell asleep. It was about 1 a.m. when the wind started. And the rain. And the thunder and lightning. And more wind. Justin, who was about 14 at the time, was the first to depart the tent for the van. Lisa was next, with Rheanne. And then Nate left.

So, I'm lying there in this big tent by myself, thinking—this is fun. And then more wind. And then Lisa popped her head in the tent to say: “We had the radio on. Tornado warning.” And so, I followed Lisa to the van, started it up, and we fled the high cliffs for the comfort of my parents' home in Appleton, arriving there about 2:30 a.m. Later that morning I went back and collected our belongings, arriving as my brother Dave was sitting by the fire enjoying his coffee. I still haven't lived that one down.

Now, in the same way that storms can wake us up, the coronavirus is a wake-up call—a way for us to recognize that we're not apart from nature. In fact, we are A PART of nature. We participate in it, and it participates in us. The incarnation of Jesus means that God is with us, Emmanuel—here, now, in everything. So, unlike the way the author of I Peter describes the trials being experienced by the people to whom he was writing—those trials probably being political persecution of early Christians by the Roman Empire—this is NOT a test. No, this is an opportunity. It is a resurrection opportunity—like the one the disciples and Thomas experienced. Do you doubt? Let me show you.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in his spiritual autobiography, titled “*Living Faith*,” describes how “even as a child, I was dismayed to find myself becoming skeptical about some aspects of my inherited faith. We learned in church that Jesus had risen from the dead three days after his crucifixion, and that all believers would someday enjoy a similar resurrection. As I grew older, I began to wonder whether this could be so. I became quite concerned about it...[and] my anxiety became so intense that at the end of every prayer, before “Amen” I added the words, “And, God, please help me believe in the resurrection.”

Have you ever wondered about that? I have. And what helped the resurrection make sense to me was a book by a feminist theologian by the name of Sallie McFague. I've mentioned her here before, too. Her book, "*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*," describes the resurrection not as some event where Jesus is beamed up, like in Star Trek. No. What the resurrection means, she suggests, is that God is now, post-Jesus, permanently present to us: "Lo, I am with you always," the resurrected Jesus said. So, the metaphor that Sallie McFague suggests is that the resurrection means that *the world is God's body*. I want to say that again, to let it sink in: the resurrection means that *the world is God's body*. Since the crucifixion of Jesus, to believe in him and his resurrection means to believe that God is present to us, BODILY, in the beauty and awe and complexity of the earth.

All the stories in Scripture of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection contain these central messages: Peace be With You. Don't be afraid. Go, and Love One Another. In our reading for today from John we hear it three times from Jesus' mouth: Peace Be With You. And then he sends the disciples out—Believe, Go. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

Now, believing isn't an intellectual act. It's physical. Believing is a bio-chemical process, starting in the brain, where we SEE the truth of an event. Like any act of seeing, to believe is an action; a physical action: a verb, not a noun. So, Jesus SHOWS himself to the disciples, and to Thomas. All of them SEE him. And so can we. It's the great surprise of the resurrection. Blessed are those who have not seen me, Jesus says, and then he shows himself to us in every tree, every blade of grass, every singing bird, every grain of wheat, every single grape, every virus.

Yes—God's love is THAT inclusive. When Jesus appears to his disciples he doesn't show up with some romantic, glow-in-the dark, slightly neon Thomas Kincade appearance. No. He says: look at my wounds. Look at my hands. Touch my side. Feel my scars. Now—go, believe, love one another, practice justice, do mercy.

And this is exactly what the planet is telling us right now. Earth is crying out: LOOK AT MY WOUNDS! TOUCH MY SIDE. FEEL MY SCARS. Now, go, believe, love one another, practice justice, do mercy. Wake up! Get involved. Make a difference.

The climate science is unmistakable. Our planet is in peril. Burning fossil fuels is what has produced this peril. If we imagine the world as God's body, then burning fossil fuels is building the cross that crucifies Christ anew.

And just as it was Empire that killed Jesus, so is it empire that wants us to keep on going just the way we were going until coronavirus slowed us all down. Empire—and its corporate sycophants of greedy CEOs and boards of trustees bent on maximizing quarterly profits no matter what happens to the Earth, want to continue the extractive economy that is a way of death, not the way of life that Jesus opens up to us. They want to drill, baby, drill, which means burn, baby, burn for the planet.

Author and Methodist Bill McKibben—who spent his youth as a member of a Congregationalist (UCC) Church, has been trying for 30 years to wake up people of faith to the climate crisis, and slowly it's starting to happen. And he's made quite clear in his most recent publications (go to the website 350.org for more—just google it, 350.org) McKibben's made quite clear that the coronavirus and the climate crisis are intimately connected—because it's up to US how we

respond to both. Pope Francis has made the same point: the coronavirus, he said, may be nature's way of waking us up to the peril of the Earth. And pay close attention: how we respond to both crises might just empower us to SOLVE both crises at the same time, IF we are wise—that is if we follow the science, and IF we hold leaders accountable—that is if we are politically-engaged.

Just last week, ministers from 10 European Union countries—Austria, Finland, Spain, and seven others, issued a joint statement that called for recovery efforts to follow principles of a just recovery. Because the fact is that mega-rich polluting corporations, like oil and gas companies, are already trying to seize the moment to secure themselves financial support, without accountability. It doesn't need to be this way. Our recovery from the coronavirus can also tackle the climate crisis—because tackling the climate crisis can create jobs, strengthen existing green companies, build new Earth-friendly social enterprises, and create a fairer, more prosperous and sustainable future for us all.

It all flows from believing in the power of God to create new life out of death; to turn disaster into opportunity; to birth a new way of living that cares for people and the planet, more than profits.

Sallie McFague, that feminist theologian who made believing the resurrection possible for me, puts it like this: “We have attempted to imagine the resurrection promise of divine presence—“Lo, I am with you always”—as a worldly reality, as the presence of God in the body of our world. In this, we have imagined God as both caring deeply for that world and calling us to care as well.”

God cares for us, through the world, by giving us God's very body...not only in Communion, but every single day, with every breath and every bite we eat. And then through Jesus, God asks us to care for the world and for each other, so that all may breathe, so that all may live. For God so loved...the world.

Now, I realize that by piling the climate crisis onto the coronavirus crisis I might be seeming to ask too much: making matters worse. Aren't things bad enough? Do you really need to remind us of THAT, too?

But in fact this is how resurrection happens: not turning away from the crisis, from the cross, but discovering through it and the wounds it brings and the death it deals the risen Christ saying: “Peace be with you. Look at my wounds. Touch my side. Feel my scars. Now, believe, go, and make a difference.”

Over the past year, we've been exploring in adult education what we've been calling “the green gospel,” and how we might put that into practice here at Union, in Green Bay, and around the globe. We've come up with as many questions as we have answers. But I think we have been realizing that the good news of Jesus Christ is the message that the Earth is not brute matter—it is alive with the beauty and grandeur of God. And that means that the Earth is not to be extracted and exploited to satisfy our short-term desires for a good quarterly return on our investments. That's the way of death, again. The Earth incarnates the Spirit of the Living God. The Earth is where heaven comes down, when we love as God loved us. The Earth calls us to act for justice.

In this era of plague, we have an opportunity to learn this resurrection truth anew. Jimmy Carter puts it this way: “Faith implies a continuing search, not necessarily a final answer. ... It is a mistake not to face our doubts courageously. We should be willing to ask questions, always searching for a closer relationship with God, a more profound faith in Christ. It is foolish to think that our own doubts can change the truth.”

Carter describes how he continually returned in his doubting to one single story. It’s in the Gospel of Mark, where a father comes to Jesus in search of a cure for his son, who is suffering from seizures. The father asks Jesus to heal his son, saying, “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replies, “All things are possible to one who believes.” And the father responds: “I believe; help my unbelief!” And the son is healed.

In other words, just as the planet is bigger than this virus, so too is God bigger than any of our doubts. God can handle our doubts—and even has the courage to share with us the opportunity to overcome them. Because Earth will eventually, through the work of dedicated scientists, and with each of us doing our part in social distancing and other practices, as policy-makers ask us...Earth will eventually show us the path toward healing from this plague. Just as the planet is bigger than this virus, so too is God bigger than any of our doubts.

We face challenges today as great as those facing the first Christians. We’re frightened. We’re locked in our homes. We’re afraid to go out.

And yet when we believe, all things are possible. We can end the extractive economy. We can advance renewable energy. We can participate in the resurrection of God’s body, the Earth.

And it starts now. Call your Congresspersons. Send emails. Read. Learn. Act. Believe. Look at my wounds. Touch my side. Feel my scars.

And realize that this is a new birth happening, with all the messiness and blood and pain of any new birth. Things will never be the same.

Earth is calling us to action. This is what resurrection means, practically: to live with purpose, to have a cause, to risk acting for what’s right.

And it’s starting right here with our collective home at Union—with baby steps, to be sure, but we’re beginning to walk the walk of Earth justice. We’re making changes to how we care for our lawns and gardens—to practice greener ways. We’re beginning to change out our energy-hogging fluorescent bulbs and fixtures with much greener LEDs. We’re turning down our water heater, unplugging our freezer and fridge while the church building isn’t being used for gatherings, and beginning to plan for a possible solar installation on the Mayflower Roof that could save us 30% of our energy costs, paying for itself in five years, and reduce our carbon footprint considerably. It would also be a sign and symbol to Green Bay that Union cares about the planet, that the kind of Christianity we practice here is a progressive, Earth-caring Christianity, where God isn’t some vengeful, far-off dude bent on apocalypse, but God is as close to us as the air we breathe and the Earth on which we walk, calling us to love one another, and especially to love the least of these among us, all things bright and beautiful.

So, we live in hope. In our Bible study this past week, we discussed what hope means to us, and Betty Bienash suggested that one way to understand hope was through the way Emily Dickinson put it in her poem, “*Hope is the Thing with Feathers.*”

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

It is true; hope asks nothing from us, and it is like a thing with feathers—the unquenchable, indescribable, imperishable, glorious, more precious-than-gold living Spirit among us.

On my walks every morning with our dog, Theo, I’ve experienced real joy over the past week during the sunny mornings as I’ve listened to the increasing symphony of bird songs. I have a bench that I sit on in our woods that faces east, so I can watch the rising sun bouncing off the lake. As I sit there, drinking my coffee, praying, and sometimes eating a breakfast bar or banana, Theo will wander off in search of some great smell. And when he does, the birds come closer to me, chirping in the trees just above me, singing this gentle and lovely lilt that no human composer has ever matched. I don’t know their names, most of those birds, but they sing to me—and ask nothing of me, not a crumb.

And yet I know that that spirit of gentleness, those things with feathers, also do depend on me, they depend on all of us to do our parts to sustain the planet on which they depend, too.

So, Jesus comes to us, today, as we are huddled in our homes, bringing us peace and hope and even joy, as a thing with feathers, who says: “Look at my wounds. Touch my side. Feel my scars. Now, believe, go, love one another, practice justice, do mercy. Wake up! Get involved. Make a difference. Care for the planet.” Or as the hymn we are about to sing puts it: “Awake from your slumbers, and rise on your wings.” Amen.

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John 20:19-31
April 19, 2020