

Easter and the Earth
I Corinthians 15:20-26, 51-58
Fourth Sunday of Easter, (April 21) 2024
Earth Day (Outdoor) Service
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Earlier this past week, on our way to Austin for the memorial story-telling service for our friend and our church's former pastor, Roger Paynter, we decided to take a quick detour by my first pastorate out from the town of Franklin. Much has changed, pastures that used to have cattle grazing are now overgrown with brush and trees, while other pastures now have houses and small developments. As we drove up to the little church at the top of the hill, we immediately noticed the sign no longer said Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, but now read Higher Dimensions Christian Center. What a name!

I'm not here to discuss the name change of my first congregation but I am interested in the assumption implied in the name: "Higher Dimensions." "Higher" implies spiritual and closer to heaven or closer to God. It implies living on a higher more heavenly level than down here among the muck and mundane. For centuries, the spiritual has been considered higher and purer while the material and earthy has been considered sinful.

For example, one of the sources of racism is rooted in 15th century Portuguese and Spanish explorers when they came upon darker skinned people of Africa and assumed they were a lower species (note the word "lower") because the darker skin was closer to the color of the earth and soil, hence interpreted as less spiritual than the lighter skinned people of Europe.

Likewise, in 16th and early 17th century England under James I, nature and the earth were considered, like women, to be disorderly, wild, and lower. Both women and nature needed to be brought under the control of the orderly male mind. The mind being more spiritual and purer and rational while the body and the earth were considered irrational, out of control, and a lower form of life. Francis Bacon, considered the founder of the modern scientific revolution, used the same language to describe science as was used in the torture of heretics, witches, and rebels. Bacon said, “Just as men should not scruple to assault and torture the bodies of women accused of witchcraft or sorcery, neither ought man to make a scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when inquisition of truth is his whole object.”

Previously, in medieval times, nature had long been considered as feminine. Christian mystics considered the feminine earth and Mother Nature as partners with God. Not on a lower level but partners. During medieval times it was important to be respectful of Mother Nature. But by the time of Bacon, nature and the earth needed dominating and the spread of civilizing empire required exploiting nature and dominating it. For example, in medieval England coal mining was considered a sin but by the time of James I and Francis Bacon, coal mining was considered a virtue.

All this old thinking has long been in the back of our American Christianity ways of thinking and in the back of the ways we were raised. As an aside, one of the results, especially in American evangelical Christianity, is that when so much emphasis is put on a higher and abstract “spiritual” understanding of Christianity, it leaves the lower, the material up to other ways of belief and practice. So someone can believe fervently in Jesus, and trust Jesus to save us, but that has nothing to do with the material beliefs of using guns, racism, exploiting the Earth, and

dominating others. In much of American evangelical Christianity there has long been a disconnect between the higher spiritual and the lower material.

But the Bible has a different way of thinking about the earth, nature, creation and the material. C.S. Lewis famously said, “God too loves material things; He invented them.” It is why the preferred terminology in Christianity is Creation. Which historically has emphasized that we are all creatures. We’re all in this together – humanity, trees, water, soil, plants, animals, and on and on.

There’s an old hymn that said, “Heaven came down and glory filled my soul.” The testimony of the entire Bible is, “Heaven came down and glory filled this Earth and all that is in it.” Our biblical faith moves from heaven to the earth and not the other way around.

The biblical direction is God coming “down” to us rather than us trying to get “higher” to heaven. Which is why the Apostle Paul says in our Scripture reading today that the Resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection of all. Easter morning is the beginning of the New Creation breaking into this old world. This is why for Christians Sunday morning is treated ever since the Gospel resurrection stories as the first day of the week. Sunday is the first day of the New Creation. It was called the Eighth Day – the first day of the New Creation. It’s why so many ancient churches were octagonal in shape – they were 8 sided, and why baptisteries were 8 sided. The original creation was completed in 7 days. Now, in Christ we have the 8th day.

And the Resurrection is not only the intervention of the New Creation; it is the template or prototype of the New Creation. The resurrected Christ shows us what New Creation will look like.

When Jesus was resurrected, he didn't leave his old body behind in the tomb and grow a new one. And he didn't leave the old body behind and become some spiritual being, a ghost. The stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are insistent to the point of becoming redundant that the resurrected body of Christ is flesh and blood – you can still see and touch the scars left by the nails and the spear. This is the body that was dead, completely, and totally dead for three days but was resurrected as a new body. Jesus was the same, but he was different. His resurrected body ate and drank and had scars and you could touch him, but he was different. He walked through locked and barred doors.

The early church understanding was that the resurrected body of Jesus was not less real but more real. In fact, first century Christians and Jews believed that the spiritual was not ghostly as much as it was made up of a denser kind of material. The resurrected Jesus was more real, not less. He was new. He was the beginning of the New Creation.

The resurrection stories of all the Gospels are united in this, as well. We disciples of Jesus enter into, participate in the New Creation in our baptism. When we follow Jesus, we are beginning to learn to live according to the New Creation. We no longer treat one another as Jew and Gentile, white or black, straight or gay but we are one people in Christ – New Creation. We no longer deal with money like old creation, but in Christ we share and give and serve – New Creation. We no longer use violence to get our way, but in Christ, we turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and give up our cloaks as well as our coats – New Creation. In the New Creation we love and treat each other with mercy. We forgive and receive forgiveness. We are patient and humble, all as part of the New Creation.

And when Mary Magdalene met the resurrected Jesus that Easter morning and mistook him for the gardener in John 20, the church said that this was no accident. Christ is the original gardener who created and cared for the first garden at Creation. And it was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Christ suffered and was arrested for his crucifixion. And the very first act of the Resurrected Christ was to tend the garden of the New Creation, just as he tended the garden of the old creation. Finally, at the end of it all, in Revelation 21 and 22, right in the middle of the New Jerusalem, there will be a garden watered by the river of life and in the garden will be the Tree of Life from which the leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). In that New Creation garden Christ will be the gardener.

In the Gospels, especially John, Jesus gives us “signs” or a kind of “windows” onto the New Creation. Jesus shows us that God is working in and through ordinary earthy stuff. So at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) water is transformed into wine. In John 6 (1-15) he takes five barley loaves of bread and two fish and feeds five thousand with a feast. Immediately after the feast, Jesus walks through and across the firm footing of a stormy sea (6:16-25). Soon he takes mud from the ground, which becomes a healing ointment for the eyes of a blind man (9:1-7). And after the Resurrection, a previously barren and empty sea yields up 153 fish (21:1-14). Everyday stuff of this Earth, everyday stuff of our lives, becomes a window through which we are able to catches glimpses of what God’s New Creation looks like. The earthy becomes an icon.

Which is also why the Eastern Church has long practiced praying with icons. Pictures of people from the Bible or from Christian history are used in worship and in prayer. They’re not praying to these pictures of the saints. Instead, these are icons, windows through which the person praying learns to see through them to see glimpses of God’s New Creation. These are icons, windows.

The resurrected Jesus Christ is the ultimate Icon, the prototype of the New Creation. He is the first-fruits. He shows us what it will look like – all of creation will be made new, not just people but all of creation will become new. This is part of the significance of the Transfiguration, where Jesus's face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white garments. In and through the transfigured Christ we receive a glimpse of God's intention for all of us and for all of this Earth. Furthermore, Christ calls us to join with him and start living out the New Creation, in the here and now.

Now all of this is going on in the background as the Apostle Paul tries in I Cor. 15 to reflect on the resurrection of Christ and our bodily resurrection. Like Christ, we too will be resurrected and like Christ it will be bodily – new bodies. Not the old bodies but certainly not ghosts. Like Christ, where we have scars but are transformed. More real. Not less.

Let me pause here and make another aside. At Roger Paynter's memorial service this past week in Austin, the entire congregation stood and sang, "We, O God, Unite Our Voices," the great hymn we enjoy singing here. It is a remarkable hymn of hope and encouragement and goes back for many of us, including and especially Roger, to our days in seminary and Crescent Hill Baptist Church. Most everyone was crying while we sang this hymn, and I stood on the chancel looking out at old friends, many of us having known each other 30, 40, even 50 years. We served together, worked alongside, been in churches together, and been to camp together – clergy and laypeople, all old friends. But at the same time, I looked out at brokenness and hurt, old wounds, and old scars. Strokes, heart attacks, surgeries, that left us limping, and old divorces and divisions, betrayals and infidelities that

also left us limping. We sang that hymn in the hope that someday in the New Creation we will be healed and made new, but we also know that the old scars will persist – healed and made whole somehow, but still there.

So, take the next step with me. New Creation is not only about resurrected and transformed people. It is about a transformed and resurrected heavens and earth – all of creation will become new. All the cosmos will be resurrected – rocks and trees, creeks and rivers, birds and fish and animals, the climate, our atmosphere, and ecosphere. All.

But – if Christ’s resurrection is the prototype, I think it also means that there will be scars and wounds still visible. They will be healed and made new but the scars on our Earth will still be known. What we are doing to God’s Creation will still be noticeable in the New Creation. Climate change, mountain-top removal, oil spill disasters, melting ice caps, and so on. How all that will be known in the New Creation, I don’t know but I do not doubt that it will be seen as scars and wounds.

What I think this means, and I am by no means alone in this, is that *the resurrection means that what we do in the present matters into God’s future. And it means that this Earthly stuff of our lives matters into God’s future.*

N.T. Wright puts it this way, “The resurrection, God’s recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God’s people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last and be enhanced in God’s new world.”

Did you hear this? What we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last and be enhanced” as part of the New Creation. Every action,

every word, every song sung, every meal served, every effort at healing, bringing justice, making peace, loving our neighbors, showing mercy, and acting gracefully by the Living Christ will be enhanced and be a part of the New Creation.

What we do matters into God's future. Let's make sure it is Christ-like Earthy stuff and not something that will scar and wound.

Part of growing as disciples of Jesus means learning to notice and pay attention to Christ and the New Creation breaking in around us.

Poets know this better than most of us. Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it this way: *Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush is afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes.*

We learn to see earth is crammed with heaven and we learn to take off our shoes and give thanks to God.

But we also oppose those Principalities and Powers, those systems of domination and death, that seek to besmirch and destroy, diminish, and erase God's creation. Through control, abuse, and exploitation the earth that is crammed with heaven is destroyed. Instead of evidence of God's glory, we see evidence of our own hubris, building our proud towers.

Creation, nature ceases to be an icon, through which we can see glimpses of God's glory and the New Creation. Instead, we see mountain-top removal, the ocean covered in plastic, and poisons running off into our water.

As I alluded to earlier, baptism is an immersion into and not out of this earthy world through the New Creation. We are called participate with God in living out the New Creation that renews and restores, heals, and transforms. This is

no spectator religion. It is wholly participatory. Because God in Christ participated in our lives by coming and living among us, becoming one of us, we also know God and know God's healing work by participating. By getting involved in God's good Creation.

One of my favorite memories is from a few years ago. Jim Lemon was gardening with children at TJR School. He had a garden fork and was turning over the soil while children were all around him, "Oohing and ahhing." Asking, "What's that?" and "Why are you doing that?" At one point Jim turned over some soil full of earthworms and the kids exploded in joy and wonderment. Of course, Jim had them sticking their hands in the soil, both hands digging down, holding the soil, feeling it, smelling of it, even tasting it. None of this spectator religion. None of this analytical, objective thinking off in the distance. And certainly, no abstract spirituality up in heaven.

No, the Christian faith and caring for Creation calls us, requires us to jump in with both hands.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.