

What May We Hope?

Psalm 130:1-8; Luke 24:13-35

Third Sunday of Easter, (April 18) 2021

Earth Sunday

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One of the joys of having our worship services outdoors is listening to the birds (not the leaf blowers and chain saws and mowers). As most of you know, I spend a lot of my late afternoons and early evenings on my porch. And watching and listening to the birds has become an enjoyable part of that. One evening I was listening to Vaughn William's *Lark Ascending* and a mockingbird landed on a nearby limb and began to sing along. It was incredible and beautiful.

Almost sixty years ago, the conservationist Rachel Carson published a book entitled *Silent Spring*. Carson wrote about what pesticides were doing to nature. Chemical pesticides, mostly developed by the same corporations which developed chemical weapons during WWII, were beginning to dominate American agriculture and were damaging not only birds and animals but also humans. Carson asked us to imagine a spring in which no birds sang – a silent spring.

Furthermore, she raised the question that if that silent spring lies in the not-too-distant future for the birds, how long before humanity meets the same fate? Carson said, first, there will be a silent spring; eventually, there will be no spring at all.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, is considered the book that sparked the modern environmental movement. Soon after its publication President Kennedy convened a conference on conservation. The public awareness

of what we were doing to our environment grew and spread, so that in 1970, President Richard Nixon, a Republican, created the Environmental Protection Agency. And the very first Earth Day was on April 22, 1970.

In the sixty years since publication of Carson's book we've come a long way. We've made progress against toxins such as DDT and were successful on saving the ozone and many other things. We have made a difference. We hoped and worked and saw some results.

While we have had more victories since then, over the last several years we feel as if we are in retreat. Corporations and individuals use their vast wealth to push back against what they call "tree-huggers," and too much of the time, the government has gone along and retreated. After a while, we have become weary of being outnumbered and overwhelmed.

We had hoped we were making more of a difference and instead, discovered that the entire global ecosystem – everything from microorganisms to coral reefs to entire cities along the coasts – was in mortal danger. And these last several years it has seemed as if the people in charge wanted the Earth to grow hotter, and the reactionary movements in the richest nations seem to be determined to make sure we not only grow hotter, but we do so faster. We don't know how long we have, and all of our stories no longer seem to be working. If we survive, we do not even know if we will recognize ourselves any longer. We had hoped for better.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson this morning. It is afternoon or early evening on Easter Day and two disciples are walking home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are walking away from hope and life and newness. They are walking away from their dreams, giving up on their hopes. They're walking the wrong way; walking toward despair.

But as they walk and as they talk, a stranger joins them (interesting – trauma studies say that we do best when we engage both physical exercise, like walking, alongside talk therapy). This stranger apparently knows nothing of what all has been happening in Jerusalem. When they hear that, they stop dead in the road. Stunned. Who is this guy? Doesn't he read the news? Doesn't he check his phone? Doesn't he do Facebook or check his feed? They say, "Are you the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard the news?" This stranger – we readers know is the resurrected Jesus – says, "What news? What are y'all talking about?" So, the disciples explain the events of the past week about their leader Jesus. In verse 21, they say, "But we had hoped." "We had hoped Jesus was the one who was going to change everything. We had hoped that he would become king and turn things around. We had hoped that imperialism would be stopped, and justice and peace would spread, people would know healing and the Earth would know wholeness. We thought it was going to happen; there was so much momentum. We were that close. Instead, it all came to nothing. The Big Powers won again. Jesus is dead and we're defeated. We're tired and in despair; we're giving up and going home to sit on the couch, eat a bucket of chicken, and binge watch *Tiger King*."

Jesus listens to them and then says, "You know there is so much you don't know. You think you know what the Bible says but let me reinterpret what is going on." And Luke tells us, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (24:27).

Cultural critic and writer Rebecca Solnit says, "People have always been good at imagining the end of the world... What we're not good at is cultivating hope when the future seems unsettling and uncertain." She goes on to say that we need to cultivate "hope in the dark," which is hope that does not think in *either/or*

terms of victory or defeat. She says, to be hopeful is risky because it's "ultimately a form of trust, trust in the unknown and the possible" (*Hope in the Dark*, p. 4).

Solnit says we need to learn different stories. Our stories of history are usually either about winning or losing, and this tidy framework limits our views of what's possible in the present as well as in the future. She suggests that we learn to trust in possibilities of what might yet come to be (p. 23).

That's what's going on with Jesus and these disciples on the road. Jesus is giving them a different story. They had hoped and now, all hope is lost. Jesus is saying, "What if not all is lost? What if God is doing something incredibly different like the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth through Jesus' death and resurrection?"

For us, on this Earth Sunday, according to our usual cause and effect thinking, we are on the edge of climate catastrophe. Climate scientists increasingly are using the term "climate emergency" to describe and interpret where we are. We had hoped we could have turned it around by now, but we haven't. Hear me clearly: I am *not* saying we're not in a climate emergency. I'm simply suggesting, along with Rebecca Solnit, that we not limit our thinking to either/or, win/lose binaries. What if there are other stories that can teach us to imagine different possibilities? What if there is hope? What if there are things we have not yet imagined? Hope is the great motivator that keeps us going, and these days, we need "hope in the dark." As Solnit says, "Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimism and pessimism" (p. xiv).

Eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant said there are only three questions worth asking: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? It is this third question that concerns us this morning: What may we hope?

Usually, we ask these questions in the order they were given. (1) What do we know? Or what's going on? (2) What should I do about it? And then, (3) What's my hope? But from a Christian perspective, the hope question comes first. When we are grounded in hope, and that hope changes how we know and how we see the issues in front of us, which therefore, changes what we do and how we act.

So how do we hope? And how do we act with hope? For example, there is a difference in genuine, grounded hope which results in our ability to see and act differently and not give up, on one hand, and magical thinking on the other hand, that says simplistically, "God will take care of it, so we can mess up the planet all we want." How do we hope again, when we are on the very edge of giving up all hope? How do we hope when there is so much upheaval and uncertainty? What keeps us from taking our own walk back to Emmaus saying, "Forget it! I had hoped but now I don't care anymore, I can't care anymore."

First, remember again, this is about God and God is the One who has called us to this ministry. Only God alone can bear the sins of the world and not be destroyed by them. In Jesus Christ, God takes the sin and suffering of this world upon Godself, and by the Holy Spirit God gives strength and comfort to every creature suffering. Furthermore, God calls us to participate in God's ministry, being witnesses to God's healing and wholeness, God's justice and peace and repair. So, remember, always, this is God's ministry. It is God's work. Not ours.

We cannot hope on our own and we cannot do this work by our own strength, so we seek to be deeply rooted in the Living God known in Christ. God in Christ is our hope and the hope of this planet in a climate emergency.

Second, Christ-centered hope is always relational. By ourselves hope will dry up. Together we hope, together we suffer and pray, together we witness to God's healing work.

Third, Christ-centered hope is a practice. We do it together with others. Rebecca Solnit says it with vivid imagery: "Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky... hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible... not guaranteed" (p. 4). We have to practice hope, get out and do it or we will lose it.

Fourth, Christ-centered hope is practiced in small steps. As we've said many times before, quoting Mother Teresa, "We can do no large things – only small things with great love." So, we write letters and cards to congressman until we wear them out. We plant trees, we plant wildflowers, show movies, find ways to reduce our carbon footprint, grow gardens, support the Farmer's Market, eat locally, and so on. Hear me: I believe strongly that every small action done in faithfulness to God, is taken by God and used in ways we do not even know about. Small steps. Practical steps. This is where we figure what hope looks like on the ground, and on Monday and Tuesday.

Finally, Christ-centered hope is known in the midst of doubt and despair. This is back to Solnit's "hope in the dark." We don't get either/or it is both/and.

Hope is practiced and known together with others while we share our suffering and the suffering of the world.

The resurrected Jesus does not return to his pre-crucified status. He shows up resurrected but with the scars of his crucifixion. Resurrection hope is in the midst of the scars of suffering.

It is true that we are in a climate emergency. But Rebecca Solnit reminds us that “inside the word *emergency* is the word *emerge*. From an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters” (p. 13).

Tom Long tells the story of Mary Lou Weisman and the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of his death. Peter’s body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, “sounded so far away, so lost.” But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. “Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death (from Thomas Long, *A Living Hope*).

There is something to learn from this story about the nature of Christian hope. Christian hope is a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of death. Christian hope is not something sweet and mild. It’s not wishful thinking and it is not optimism that things are progressing in this world.

Christian hope is impudent, counter to the powers of death which are intent on destroying this earth and destroying each and every one of us.

Let us take heart and let us practice hope. The Living Christ walks alongside of us even when we’re going the wrong way. But as he reinterprets our stories, and as we practice our faith, our hearts are warmed and we come to see him among us, let’s make a U-turn and head back the other way. Instead of walking away from the resurrection let’s run back toward it. Instead of walking in despair let’s run toward hope of the Living God. In this climate emergency, Christ’s new creation is emerging. Let’s be a part of it.

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