

“Heaven on Earth”

Acts 3; Luke 24

Gordon S. Wiersma ~ Earth Day Sunday 4/26/09

What might a fish story in Luke, a healing story in Acts, and an Earth Day observance at Hope Church have to do with each other...? That's what I've been asking myself this week. I don't think the connection is obvious – but for me that's been part of the fun and interest of wondering about it and I hope that will be the case for you too. There are good reasons on an Earth Day Sunday to make an exception to the lectionary and choose a more obvious Earth Day sounding sort of text to listen to and reflect on (we actually did do that with the Psalm this morning) - because the lectionary wasn't put together with Earth Day in mind for today or any other Sunday, and it can be important to focus on places in scripture that speak directly to the themes of Creator and creation – the Psalms especially express such themes – so Jill and I want to keep our options open for departures from the lectionary for future Earth Day observances.

But maybe we would want to ask: 'what does Jesus say about Earth Day?' - 'what do the Gospels have to say about gratitude for and care for creation?' Well, the Gospels and Jesus have very little if anything to say to those things directly – some people might want to differ with me on that, but it doesn't seem to me that the issue is addressed directly at all. So then, are environmental issues not important because Jesus doesn't talk about it? That seems a very odd question to me! There are all sorts of issues that we wrestle with today that reflect our particular time and culture – issues and setting different from the time of Jesus and the Bible. But what has always been the case is that Christians look to the story of Jesus and the story of all of Scripture to speak timeless truths to our time – and in our time the environment is an issue – or is it? Is it an issue for Christians?

The answer 'yes' may seem obvious to you – and here we are observing Earth Day, so it seems clear we are affirming the importance of this as a congregation; but it seems an important question still to ask – 'is the environment an issue for Christians?' – because the answer to that question has not been clear for a long time to the Christian Church and still remains fuzzy for many Christians today. And what occurred to me is that this Eastertide – this season of resurrection celebration – could be an especially good and important time to ask and seek an answer to that question in a particular way – by asking what it is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ might have to say to Earth Day. Because even if our answer is 'yes' to the environment as an issue for Christians, I wonder if we've seen the power of the resurrection story itself calling us to and strengthening us in that commitment – and that's what brings us to the healing story and the fish story.

As the Book of Acts tells the story of the fledgling church in the days after the resurrection of Jesus, we hear this miraculous story of a crippled man healed by Peter and John in Jerusalem; the people want to make heroes of Peter and John – but Peter wants to make clear that what this healing is about is the resurrection of Christ: 'don't look at us' Peter says 'it's not our power at work here; it is God's power in Jesus Christ, who was crucified and is now risen' – and as Peter talks he uses some fascinating and beautiful

phrases – Jesus is the ‘Author of life’, he says; the Spirit of the risen Jesus has given this man ‘perfect health.’

Whenever there are healing stories - whether in Jesus’ ministry told in the gospels or here in the early church – they are always meant to point to a broader reality, a deeper truth about the kingdom of God, about the direction and heart of what God’s redemptive power is about: it is the Author of Life bringing wholeness, healing, to the brokenness of life. And I say it’s important to look to that broader, deeper reality, because the thing to remember is that not everyone was healed – right? – not everyone with a disease or deformity is made whole – but the healing stories point to both the promise of and yearning for a physical wholeness as well as spiritual wholeness; the Author of Life is not just about some sort of ethereal spiritual stuff, there is something very this-worldly, very physical and earthy about the good news – life made whole is not meant just for eternity, but now and here. God’s essence, purpose, is about restoring life to wholeness.

So keep that in mind... ..and then there is the fish story – the story in Luke about Jesus appearing to his followers after the resurrection. There are several such post-resurrection stories in Luke and the incidents share many similarities through all 4 gospels: Jesus appears suddenly to a group that has gathered; they are afraid; Jesus says ‘Peace’; there are some doubts; Jesus shows his scars; Jesus encourages/commissions them to tell the good news. But with all those similarities, you may have noticed I’ve been calling this the fish story - because there is that interesting, unique detail here of Jesus eating some fish (there is actually mention of fish also in a resurrection story in John – and that’s fish for breakfast which is not so appealing! – and it implies that Jesus eats, but doesn’t actually say it...) – here the gathering is at night so the fish sounds a bit more palatable, and it specifically says that Jesus EATS some of it!

Now there are all sorts of things going on here in the story about emphasizing the reality of the resurrection of Jesus – but this fish detail in particular seems to really want to focus us on the physicality, the earth-iness of what is happening. Last Sunday when Cindi Veldheer DeYoung read the Epistle lesson from 1st John, she introduced it with a brief mention of how the writer was concerned about the pitfalls of Docetism – a belief that says Jesus was a spiritual reality, but that he was not physical – and so only the ‘spiritual’ is important in life, not the physical. And this resurrection fish story addresses that same issue/problem of Docetism in the church. In these stories, with all the talk of scripture, revelation, incarnation, messiah - of death, resurrection – of repentance/ forgiveness/ atonement – all this happens in the realm of the physical – the body – with people – on earth! The resurrected Jesus eating some fish is a fascinating and mysterious thing – and it certainly points to the mystery and promise of eternal life and risen hope and new creation – but it also points to the physical itself being affirmed, and to life here and now given importance.

And I think what we can realize as we hear these stories in the midst of an Earth Day observance is that the church has been held for a long time in the misguided grips of its own kind of Docetism – not so much about Jesus, as about us, and salvation - about earth and creation - about life and the focus of our living- a kind of belief that separates out ‘spiritual things’ and puts that above ‘material matters’; a belief that says the resurrection is

about eternal life more than life now - about being saved more than living as saved people; and certainly a belief that puts human matters over concerns for earth/creation/nature – a belief that makes human need central and exiles creation to the periphery, if it is even recognized at all.

And as with the Docetism that distorts the truth of Jesus, that hierarchy of spiritual over physical, human over creation, is not just a quaint problem – it is a deadly path. If we do not see the Author of Life, the Risen Christ pointing us to our humanity – to our earth-iness – to our need for healing now – then we will end up with odd questions such as this: ‘Do Christians need to care about the environment? About faithful use of earth’s resources? About the impact of my life on the world around me?’ Those are such revealing questions because they show how greatly the church has distanced itself from the power of the resurrection as the message of life and hope for this world and for here and now; the Church proclaiming to follow the Author of Life, while instead being complicit in the ways of death toward creation. That dichotomy of spiritual/physical is a deep and deadly rut in the church – it has often forgotten that it is the BODY of Christ – it has lived out a separation that has led Christianity to follow a path of misuse for others and for creation.

And of course it is a false dichotomy: the spiritual and physical are not divided, they are one – they are the totality of life; we cannot live divided from Creation, with every breath we take we rely on and interact with it; we do not receive the gift of eternal life as a waiting game for the future, but beginning now in the mystery and wonder and gift that life now is important – that the Author of Life brings healing NOW – that the resurrection of Jesus Christ embodies wholeness now; and it is a false division to believe that we can live in faith and repentance and integrity now without a connection to care for creation. There is no division – for Hope Church as we engage issues of economic challenges, and clean water, and sustainable agriculture through ECHO, and walk for the hungry, and peace for nations and reconciliation of races, and health for communities – those are all about a spiritual/physical unity; and it is about humanity/creation linked as one body in need of resurrection life.

The Spirit of Risen Christ is getting the attention of the church these days to care about creation - often from outside the Church. But if our motivation is only for us and for our human good, it will not be sustained; it’s OK if we start on the issues because we realize we are in trouble – but the only way such efforts will be sustained is when we come not from our fear but from our faith; the only way we will have the courage for faithful choices and the strength to sustain our efforts is when we realize this is about the resurrection – about the Risen Christ leading us in healing for all nations and wholeness for all creation.

What might a healing story, a fish story, and Earth Day at Hope Church have to do with each other...? A lot, I think. The Risen Christ calls and leads us in healing as followers of the Author of Life – the power of the resurrection here and now for all people and for all creation. AMEN.