

**Earth day/Easter**  
Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
April 22, 2012

Psalm 4  
Luke 24:36b-48

In this spring season of Easter, signs of resurrection seem to be all around us. We see new life on trees and flowers. Despite the very dry weather we have had (until last night) there are green buds, green grass, colorful everything. But somehow it does not seem right that the lilacs, dogwood, tulips and iris all bloomed simultaneously, in March and early April. All the beauty came at once. Was it a sign of hope? Or a sign of something gone wrong?

Our text from Luke today gives us a story much like the one we heard last week from the gospel of John. Jesus mysteriously appears to his disciples and says “Peace be with you.” The disciples of course are startled, frightened, panicked. Wouldn’t you be if you saw someone appear in front of you who you thought was dead?

Jesus shows them his hands and feet, the places where he should have wounds, holes from the nails. With this bodily evidence their panic shifts slightly to wonder and then to joy. The wounds that had meant death are now healed, evidence of life. Jesus is so alive he is hungry so they give him fish; no mention of loaves this time, just the fish. They are moving toward belief, but it is not easy to understand what they are seeing. With this miraculous healing and renewal of Jesus’ body, their own inner healing begins. They start to understand the scripture in new ways; their minds are opened to new meanings in the ancient holy texts they thought they knew so well.

On this Earth Day, when we read about Jesus showing up alive — his wounds healed — I cannot help thinking of the wounded Earth. She shows us her disfigured

mountain tops from mountain top removal mining. We see the wounds caused by fracking, the holes in the ozone layer, floods, hurricanes, wildfires. We experience the warm winter and hotter summers. Dare we touch these wounds?

These wounds, these signs of death, are frightening. Do we hide in fear, standing at a distance, like most of the disciples did that horrible Friday? Or can we venture to the tomb with the women, to care for our dear planet?

Like Jesus' wounds, the Earth's wounds are real. Most of the scientific community agrees that these injuries to our home — the Earth — are caused by humans. There are of course some doubting Thomas' that do not believe in climate change, some scientists and religious people who see the wounds but do not believe. Must we see and touch the wounds, feel the impact of the wounds, in order to spread the news? To be part of the healing of the Earth?

The disciples saw and believed. Did they feel overwhelmed at the prospect of bringing change? They were still under the Roman Empire after all; they were still struggling to make sense of what Jesus said and how that related to what their own religious leaders taught in the synagogues. And yet they understood in new ways. Jesus is alive!

As much as I love a good metaphor, they all break down if you push them too hard, which of course I have a tendency to do. In this case, when Jesus showed himself he was already healed, he was alive. The wounds of our Earth are fresh wounds, they are not healed over

Even if the metaphor is not exact, I want to stick with it because we are committed to Anabaptism, committed to following in the footsteps of Jesus, to following

Jesus in life. We understand that the whole point of Jesus living among us was his life; we imitate his life, not his death. If we think Jesus' main goal in coming among us was to die a violent death then we are stuck thinking (subconsciously but also theologically) that violent murder is okay. Violence saves us so it must part of life, even give life somehow.

In my mind, it is not too big a leap to then say that the Earth is not all that important. We are all going to die and anyway like the country gospel song says, "This world is not my home, I'm just a'passing through." It is not about life here on Earth, it is about what comes next. If we are saved by violence it becomes too easy to turn our heads as our planet home is killed.

The reality of our bodies is one which intrigues me. We speak often of Christ's body — the church. We spend a lot of money finding ways to care for and improve our own physical bodies. We sometimes speak of the Earth as a body or of bodies of water. In the past 35 years, ecofeminists have explored the connections between the ways women's bodies are treated and the ways we treat the Earth. Might there also be a relationship between how we understand Jesus' body and how we treat the Earth? Theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker begin to make some of these connections in their book "Saving Paradise." Their study of theology and experiences of domestic violence led them to question the idea that is so prevalent among Christians that it was Jesus' gruesome death by crucifixion that saves the world. They challenge the idea that it is the crucifixion that saves, saying instead that violence raised up begets more violence, in homes, in churches and between countries.

Their search to understand the crucifixion took them to the Mediterranean where they searched for art that depicts Jesus' suffering and death. What they found in the earliest churches and catacombs was that Jesus' body was not there. As the angel said, he is risen.

What they did see was the early symbol for Christianity — the garden. They finally saw Jesus, but they had not recognized him at first. He was the risen Christ in the garden, in paradise. That is where Mary met him after all. In the gospel of John, Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener until he calls her by name.

When Brock and Parker knew what to look for, they began to see Jesus. There on walls and ceilings, on domes, above doors, was the healed and risen Jesus — with stars, trees, rivers, animals. Jesus was in the garden, in paradise.

In the early church when new converts came to faith their extensive training prepared them to enter a new life with Christ and the community. It was a life that began in the waters of baptism, in the symbolic rivers that led to paradise, where they lived together in blessed community. Christ in paradise was the predominant image for early Christians for nearly 1,000 years in Italy and Turkey.

It wasn't until the two theologian detectives traveled to northern Europe that they finally found Jesus' body on a cross, at the cathedral in Cologne. There they saw a carving of a life-size Jesus on the cross, made around 960-970 AD. Brock and Parker surmise that while certainly violence and death were a part of life in the first millennium, the principal image of Jesus was Christ in an earthly paradise.

But here, in the land that Charlemagne took by extreme violence, where the golden cross was held high as soldiers marched into battle, where people were baptized

under threat of death, Jesus appears on the cross. Was paradise lost? Was Jesus to be found only on the cross? When the church says that one must be baptized or die, that killing in the name of Christ makes you holy, something must shift theologically (and in the art) to allow this to happen.

Pope Urban II began the first crusade in 1095, saying that war was holy, that crusaders who killed Jews and Muslims were not only forgiven, but given a place in paradise — after death. No longer was paradise something that one received or participated in after baptism. No longer was paradise a gift on Earth, a gift from God of the earth. Now paradise was achieved by killing and received after death. The displacement of Earth as paradise was official.

Almost 1,000 years later, violence is viewed as holy by extremists of every religion. The planet is in peril because of the violence we inflict upon it. We must wonder together about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, about the meaning of paradise. Is our life together on this planet meaningless, are we just passing through? Will the end result always be death? Or are we part of creation, created to live with Christ and care for paradise?

Last week we heard Adam say that part of the reason the Gospel of John is so explicit about the resurrection is because John's community is refuting the followers of Thomas, those Gnostics who did not believe in bodily resurrection. They did not believe that the wounds of Christ could be healed, that he could walk among them again. The writers of Luke and John go to great lengths to make it clear that Jesus' wounds are healed, that he in fact could breathe and walk, eat, talk and listen, just as he had when he was their teacher. In his resurrection he is teaching them again, in new ways.

I know that I am preaching to the choir here, that you all know and understand the dire situation that we are in on this planet. Still, what might it mean if we touch the wounds, feel the pain of Earth? Do we as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, have a responsibility not only to God's children, but to God's creation? Worshipping here at University Park Church of the Brethren we receive the benefits of a response the UPCOB congregation has made. The roof here is covered in solar panels, producing more energy than the church building needs annually. For our part as Hyattsville Mennonite there are a number of families who are turning the yard at the church house into garden space, getting to know the Earth more intimately. What other ways might we respond as a congregation?

As we see the Risen Christ, as we touch the wounds, will we, like the disciples, understand the ancient texts in new ways, understand our role with new eyes?

Let us be moved to spread the news, that healing is possible, that there is the promise of new life. Christ is alive. May we hear Jesus as he says in the gospel of Luke, "Today you will be with me in paradise."