

Second Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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April 23, 2017

Biblical scholars say that when today's Gospel of John has the risen Christ breathing on his disciples, John is intentionally calling up images of the creation story in Genesis when God scoops up the earth and breathes into it and creates the first human.

It's even more powerful in the original languages because in both Hebrew and Greek the word for "breath" also means "wind" and "spirit." — *ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. So the first creation story begins with God's wind-spirit-breath hovering over the water calling forth the world about to be born, and the second creation story includes God breathing into us creatures-of-earth the breath of life.

John apparently wants us — when we think about Easter — also to call to mind the emergence of life on a pristine good earth.

But it's not like everything is gauzy and airbrushed in this text. John also makes sure we notice that there's a rupture here — that something is broken, fractured.

Three times in this relatively short text John highlights the wounds of Jesus. First, Jesus shows them to the disciples; and then Thomas — who wasn't there the first time — describes those wounds pretty vividly;¹ and then Jesus finally encounters Thomas and offers those wounds and scars to Thomas for him to touch and to see.

If this Easter Gospel wants us to call to mind the birth of creation, the earth breathing in its infancy, it also shows us — three times — that things in the present, even in the face of resurrection, are not as they should be. Something has intervened. Something has been fractured, broken.

When we think of Earth Day today many of us probably immediately picture that gorgeous image of earth from space. It's beautiful. It's pristine. But it's also true that

¹ "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side... I will not believe."

the image that catalyzed the first Earth Day was much more of a close-up. Like a close-up to a wound. It was the year before the first Earth Day when Sen. Gaylord Nelson witnessed the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill — at that time the largest oil spill in U.S. history, and still today the third largest in our history behind the Deepwater Horizon and the Exxon Valdez spills. Senator Nelson was so troubled by the image of this wounded coastline, what had been beloved, pristine, and full of life, now with creatures above and below the surface wounded and dying... He was so disturbed by this image of the wounded earth that he organized the first Earth Day that just over a year later in 1970 brought over 20 million Americans into the streets — 10% of the entire population of the U.S. (Interesting fact: they chose April 22nd so it wouldn't interfere with university final exams... or with spring break.) Within months of that first Earth Day, the EPA was created, the Clean Air Act was dramatically strengthened, and within two years the Clean Water Act was passed.

This history and today's text might have us ask: *“What do wounds have to do with the re-creation of the world?”*

It's interesting that in the Gospel Jesus never chides Thomas for wanting to touch and see the scars on his body. In fact without prompting Jesus displays them to the disciples. It is as if the disciples seeing the wounds confirms that this really is the beloved earthly body that had seemed abused beyond hope, that it is that very body, not some fake replacement, that is now living and breathing again.

I wonder: if our wounded earth were to be reborn, what beloved, wounded places would you first seek out to see, to touch — to see if it was really real, really risen?

Would you turn on the tap in Flint, Michigan, to see if the water flowed crystal clear and pure again? Would you take a deep breath in Beijing, or walk through restored forests and prairies of Illinois? Would you slip down to the Riverwalk to see if you could once again jump in and play in the Chicago River?

For you, what would be the sign that this wounded earth had been restored and raised to flourishing life? What would you want to see?

Jesus in the text today says, “blessed are those who have not [yet] seen and yet believe.”

That can sound like faith in something magical or completely otherworldly, but I actually think it's much like what many of the people in the March for Science were

doing yesterday. Scientists, health care workers, environmental justice advocates were marching. Many of the signs I saw proclaimed a faith that professes that when we attend carefully and honestly to the very real environmental wounds on the earth and its creatures, we can — in a way we have yet fully to see — be witnesses to a world renewed and raised up beyond our human power, when we learn to step back and let the Creator's power work for healing and resurrection where we have wounded and destroyed. Science can bear witness to those wounds, and help us learn how to make space for God's creative power to raise up what we have harmed.

What would it look like to see a world raised up from environmental wounds? In some ways, we are already witnesses to this resurrection. The United States Clean Air Act, strengthened in those months after the first Earth Day, has saved the lives of more Americans than have been killed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam combined — *every year* for decades now. Every year, it saves more than 160,000 lives.² More than all our recent war-dead, raised up each year.

An early pastoral call for me was to be village pastor to a little Lutheran retreat center in the Glacier Peak Wilderness of Washington State, Holden Village. It's on the site of an abandoned copper mine, and while it's situated in a gorgeous valley in the North Cascades, the village was dwarfed by massive piles of mine tailings that were an otherworldly color of orange, that spread arsenic and other toxins into the air and the water. This otherwise beautiful site was literally a superfund site. My kids spent three years of their young lives with the scars of those tailings towering over the village where they lived and went to school. But after a multi-year remediation project concluding this year, with streams carefully rerouted, the tailings piles re-graded and covered with good soil, thousands of baby pine trees grown off-site from pine cones gathered in the valley have been planted there and what used to be an orange-colored toxic wasteland will one day be a forest that my kids will walk through, maybe with kids or grandchildren of their own. I imagine they will reach out to touch that scarred ground and the trunks of those trees to see that that beloved body of earth is real, risen.

Maybe you can call to mind wounded places at which you have already witnessed the power of the resurrection. Parts of the Great Lakes that used to be too polluted for swimming now thriving beaches. What once were treacherous streets here in Chicago now seeing people — even kids — riding on protected bike lanes. Where there used

² thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/41/4/1.3.full

to be paved runways and taxiways on Northerly Island, now nature trails are open for all, trees returning, a home for sea birds, and even campsites in the works.

Jesus in the text today says, “blessed are those who have not [yet] seen and yet believe.” Where are the wounded places God may be inviting you to believe in?

My current research is studying the natural or green burial movement. One of the practices is conservation burial, that combines the legal protections of a cemetery with a nature preserve, so places of burial become strongly protected flourishing places of life. In the U.S. these are often beautiful woodlands. But the largest natural burial ground in the UK was begun by the Church of England, a place called Barton Glebe, and they took a piece of land that had been nearly completely deforested, a kind of stubble field, and first planted around 10,000 little whips of trees, leaving open little glades, and asked who would like to be part of a century-long process of returning this area to a forest. So many people responded that they’ve already doubled the size of the burial ground. In a wounded clear cut, among real tombs, a sort of resurrection faith is looking already toward what they have not yet seen, and yet believe.

What wounded place on this earth is in need of a disciple like you who will — out of love — bear witness to God’s life-giving promise of resurrection and new life? It may be the renewal of a city park, the healing of lungs in a Chicago school, the protection of alpine tundra, or the growth of a tiny backyard garden. Or maybe it is bearing witness to the wounds of the crucified on the earth’s most vulnerable bodies, exposing the violence and resisting its evil. It can look like long odds. Especially these days. But that’s what Good Friday, Easter, and a broken body given for us have always been about.

In the text today Jesus turns from his first disciples in order to address us who would come later, and says, “blessed are those who have not [yet] seen and yet believe.”