

“Forgiveness and the New Creation”  
April 14, 2024

Genesis 2:4b-15  
John 20:19-23

Each year as spring arrives, we mark not only resurrection but also the rebirth of the natural world—with its own deep religious significance. Over 50 years ago, concern for the natural world amid signs that it was dying rather than being reborn led to the beginning of Earth Day. The goal was to bring attention to the threat that pollution posed to our planet and our lives. The focus was on college students and April 22 was chosen because it fell between spring break and final exams.

I wasn’t in college then, but I joined a lot of the students and Richwoods High School in Peoria, Illinois, and took April 22 as a day off from school. We went over to Bradley University for the first Earth Day celebration. With environmental awareness just beginning, we did what any high school students would do given such an opportunity. We hung out on campus; we listened to the rock bands that played throughout the day. And occasionally, when there wasn’t anything else to do, we wandered through the exhibits that were set up.

I guess you could say we took Earth Day kind of lightly.

This was a day to emphasize the need for clean water at a time when lakes and rivers were catching fire. It was an occasion to stress the importance of clean air when leaded gasoline emissions and other pollutants were choking the air of our cities as well as our lungs.

And, you know, things changed.

Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency—**RICHARD NIXON!** Legislation made polluting more difficult, although certainly not impossible, and through such efforts this dear old Earth is much better that it was 50 years ago and much better than it would be had such actions not been taken.

Earth Day grew into Earth Month over the past half-century as new environmental concerns grew as well. In the intervening decades, the amount of plastic waste in the oceans and the amount of toxic waste in landfills from our much-loved high-tech devices has grown. That causes some worry among some people—but not so much that we are ready to give up our plastic containers or our devices.

Of course, what we know *now*, what *causes* us to worry the most—during Earth Month and all year round, really—is the threat to the Earth, to us, and to all living things that is posed not by pollution but by climate change. I don’t need to present the facts to this congregation—you know them. I don’t need to expend words or breath to convince you that climate change is real, that is it caused by human action and that it is sustained by human inaction. You know that and you know that year after year the situation keeps getting worse.

So, on this Sunday—or on any Sunday, really—I wonder what I can say to you that you don’t already know, that you haven’t heard from this pulpit countless times, that you haven’t read about or heard about on the radio or seen on TV.

You know that the small actions of a large group of people can have enormous consequences. You work at reducing your carbon footprint, you cut back on fossil fuel consumption. All that you do is good—keep at it!

But you also know that addressing climate change is not only a matter of individual action, however virtuous we might be. It requires the commitment and actions of nations and corporations whose resistance is still great and whose own immediate self-interests often run counter to enacting policies that will address this problem that grows while we stall.

So here we are—somewhere in this middle ground between individual action that is not enough on its own and large-scale global efforts over which we have little, if any, control or influence. And while this might seem at first to be a difficult and unenviable place to be, in just this place we can begin to see the resources and power that faith provides for us as we continue to address the very real problems we face in an increasingly dangerous situation.

From faith we are able to forgive, to live in solidarity with the suffering of the earth and its people, to find joy—and ultimately to hope.

Let's start with forgiveness first because that might be the most difficult to understand and at the same time what we need the most.

We live in unforgiving times. On both the left and the right, there is little room for error in these days and little tolerance of error as well. The polarization and divisions that we know in our nation and in our world are in many cases the detritus of decades and even centuries old animosities that have resulted in the inability or the unwillingness to forgive. We have chosen sides and those on the opposite side are held in contempt.

The risen Christ gives us, his followers, an option: forgive or retain. Notice that this is not forgive or don't forgive. Forgive or retain.

“Retain” suggests a keeping, even a holding close. Listening as the risen Christ presents this choice, I wonder: why would we want to hold close the sins of others? Of what advantage would it be to carry the sins of other along with us? One paraphrase of this text has Jesus ask: “If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?”

Well?

Forgiveness doesn't always come easily or naturally. This ability is a gift that we receive through the Spirit of God. It gives us the opening to begin anew after we have experienced the worst—or caused the worst. We can even start anew in the midst of the worst.

And here we are: climate change presents us with unmitigated disaster on a global level. And our discussions about it are filled with recriminations and accusations from all sides. Forgiveness invites us to loosen the retaining grip and to seek solutions rather than to place blame.

Here's the thing: Climate change doesn't care. It doesn't care how bad people are or how righteous they are. It will keep increasing, keep wreaking havoc on our world as long as we retain what we are doing—as long as we keep holding close the deadly ways that we have long embraced.

Forgiveness offers a way forward, a chance to go in a different direction as the current way is leading to destruction.

Our faith also helps us see how we might side with the suffering—with the people and the nations most adversely affected by climate change and, indeed, with the agony of the earth. This is the way of the risen Christ.

In both the Gospel of Luke and as we heard this morning in the Gospel of John the risen Christ is still the broken Christ. Standing among many disciples, Jesus shows his hands and his side.

Resurrection shows itself not in a healed distance but in a wounded closeness toward all that still hurts.

We confront climate change not as those who are untouched by it but as those who are affected by it—and the more the climate changes the more obvious this will become.

After Easter, we understand Jesus as both resurrected *and* wounded. He is known as both risen from death *and* still bearing the marks of crucifixion. He comes to those who are afraid, he comes to those who sorrow and suffer. But he does not come as one who says, “Don’t worry. Look, it will all go away.”

No. He comes and shows his wounds.

We, who live in hope of resurrection are still broken people in a broken world.

It is the wounded, risen Christ who sends us back into the world to be with the wounded and broken as the wounded and broken people we are.

There, is, of course, something else in the resurrection story: joy. And joy shows up as a hinge between suffering and forgiveness.

The disciples see the wounded Christ and rejoice. Rejoicing, they receive the Spirit and are commissioned to be those who forgive. Only when we hear the *crucified* and risen Christ do we ourselves find reason to rejoice even in the midst of all that wears us down and threatens us.

Resurrection joy grows from the faith that all of life, all of creation is still loved by God with a love that is stronger than death. In this faith we continue to work to restore this planet in the face of the great danger that our human actions have created. Joy does not mean that positive results are guaranteed—because—and remember this—there is no guarantee.

But with the power that joy creates in our lives we are able as those who stand in solidarity with a hurting world to do the work that forgiveness makes possible.

Jesus breathes the Spirit into the disciples in much the same way as God breathed the breath of life into the first human being. The similarity is not coincidental. John wants us to know that in the risen Christ God is beginning a new creation.

With the resurrection of Jesus, his followers understood that something new had begun. And they needed new ways of talking. How do you speak of an event that changes everything when everything seems the same? How do you talk about something unique—something that has never happened before and has not happened since?

Some early Christians seized on the idea of a new creation.

Their Jewish scriptures told them that in seven days God created all that is. They affirmed that on the Sunday of the resurrection—the eighth day—God started a new creation in raising Jesus from

the dead. Just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human being, so the risen Christ breathed new life, a *holy* spirit into the disciples.

God's word at the end of the first creation was, "It's good—very good!" Everything's all right.

God's word at the end of this new creation is once again: "It's good."

It's good—but it is up to us and our work to make sure that everything will be all right.

Let us continue that work of hope with the forgiveness, the solidarity, and the joy that resurrection makes possible.