

“How Does the Creature Say ‘Thanks?’”

John 20: 19 – 23

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Earth Sunday, Second Sunday of Easter

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

When our ‘new’ Chalice Hymnal came out in 1995 (22 years ago!), I was thrilled with the addition of many hymns new to me, one of them quickly became my favorite; the one we sang at the beginning of the service, “God of the Sparrow God of the Whale” by Brian Wren. For those of you who, like me, call it a favorite, I apologize for having us sing only 3 verses. You’ve probably guessed my reasoning, that verse 3 gets us to the empty grave then asks the question, “How does the creature say grace? How does the creature say thanks?” How do we indeed?

Today, this second Sunday of Easter, we continue to celebrate the spirit and promise of resurrection. Today, this Earth Day Sunday, we lift up and celebrate the gift of our earth, the beauty of the earth, “Lord of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise”, for the songbirds, for April showers, for trees that shade and sun that warms, for flowers, for all of nature that calms us and soothes us? How *do* we even begin to say thanks?

Today on this Earth Sunday and on this Sunday of resurrection spirit, it is right to give God thanks and praise for all that this good earth holds. And yet, that isn’t enough according to Leah Schade, assistant professor of preaching and worship at Lexington Theological Seminary. In an article that appeared this past week in *The Christian Century*, and also in yesterday’s *Herald Leader* (how many of you saw it?) she writes, “This weekend, many churches will celebrate Earth Day. Preachers will extol the beauty of God’s creation....The emphasis will be on celebrating the glories of creation.”

She says, “I can’t do that this year.” She goes on to tell about when she was a pastor she would place a pot of soil, a watering can and a basket of seeds on the alter and invite the children to help bless the seeds. Everyone would choose a packet of seeds from the basket and depart with the promise of spring and new life – and with the satisfaction that they had done their part for God’s creation. But, she adds, “These rituals of creation are right and salutary. But they’re not going to cut the mustard right now.” She goes on...and this is the harder part to hear:

“Now is not the time for feel-good ‘green’ hymns and ecological tokenism in our churches. Not when we have the most anti-environmental cabinet in our nation’s history, when Congress has voted to give coal mining companies free reign to pollute waterways, not when fracking and drilling are poisoning air, water, and land. Not when

environmentalists in Latin America are being murdered because they are in the way of corporations and profit. In fact, she says that we should make Earth Day about the Earth Martyrs and how, like they, *we* need to not take up seed packets but take up the cross and stand for our earth.”

I do take exception to a part of what Dr. Schade writes, the part about now NOT being the time for feel good hymns and celebration of the beauty of the earth. After all, it is the Easter season, we are about celebration of new life. It IS time for seed packets and feel good hymns about the earth. But I do understand what she is saying about these being desperate times. So instead of making it an either/or, maybe we should have both... words of celebration and words to the seriousness of our times. Scary times. Fearful times. And to that, today’s scripture speaks loud and clear.

The disciples stood behind closed doors, locked doors, afraid of what might happen. Simon Peter and ‘the other disciple’ as he is so called in John, had gone to the tomb when Mary ran to tell them, had seen for themselves that the body was not there. But they didn’t understand. Even after Mary had seen Jesus and ran to tell them, they still didn’t understand, didn’t believe her, after all, she WAS just a woman. And so, they huddled together, afraid, behind locked doors.

Many of us know the rest of this passage. It’s the scripture text each Sunday following Easter Sunday; called ‘John’s Little Pentecost’ story; how Jesus came to them, how Thomas wasn’t there and so didn’t believe and got the nickname “Doubting Thomas”. But then when he WAS there Jesus came and he believed and we have the famous faith statement “Happy are those who don’t see but believe” meaning the church at the time of John’s writing and meaning us. That’s the scripture in its entirety but let’s go back to that very beginning. For today, for this Earth Day Sunday, let’s go back to those disciples who have not yet experienced the risen Christ, those disciples who were huddled in fear, behind locked doors, who we are so very much like.

Maybe not cowering behind locked doors but fearful nonetheless.

It’s not often that this Sunday with the disciples locked away in fear and Earth Sunday fall on the same day. So, let’s take advantage of this time to see what this scripture may be saying to us.

Michael Kinnamon, who many of us know, Disciples theologian, former Dean at Lexington Theological Seminary, former General Secretary for the National Council of Churches, has a new book out titled, “The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear”. It’s a short book, only 95 pages, would be a good study guide for a Sunday school class. In the

introduction, Kinnamon writes that ‘contemporary American society is saturated with fear, fear that is often out of proportion to actual threats.’ He goes on in the first chapter, “Fear, when it becomes excessive or misdirected, is itself dangerous. It allows us to lash out against those who are different, it leads us to succumb to despair or paralysis or cynicism’, in other words, hiding out behind locked doors.

On this Earth Day Sunday, how does fear and the reality of our deteriorating environment – that is a real threat to our survival and our children’s survival and especially our grandchildren’s survival – how does fear and our deteriorating environment fit together?

I don’t know about you but when I see pictures of glaciers melting and read about the 4 species of bees that have gone extinct just in the last couple of years (remember, without bees we have no coffee!), and see the super storms and weather patterns that are developing, I don’t know about you but I become afraid. Some people say that’s not a faithful response, that I should be saying, “Oh, God has a plan, will take care of it.” But what if God’s plan has something to do with us stepping in and doing the right thing? Something about being caretakers, stewards, but instead we are turning our backs to God’s plan? So, yes, I become afraid, and since it’s so huge, and really, what can I do, my fear turns to despair or paralysis. I become like one of God’s creatures, the ostrich, and metaphorically put my head in the ground because if I just don’t see or hear what is happening then, well, maybe it’s not real, will just go away.

And there’s another fear, I think, that has a hold of us when we think about the destruction of our environment and Dr. Kinnamon addresses this fear in his book. He writes, “Many Americans seem to fear the loss of a lifestyle built on an increasingly unsustainable use of natural resources.” And he asks, “Is such a lifestyle worthy of our attachment if it threatens the well being of our neighbors or of future generations?”

OK, you are probably thinking, this Earth Day sermon when we are supposed to be celebrating the Earth has become a real downer. The preacher is saying we are a fearful people, locked away in our rooms of denial in order to keep the lifestyle we have or desire to have. Don’t despair. The text didn’t end in fear and so we don’t either. Time to go back to the text....

Jesus came into the room where the disciples were hiding, he breathed on them, saying, ‘receive the Holy Spirit’ offered them a blessing of peace and it was after this that they saw, they understood, and they were able to leave their fears behind.

Kinnamon, in his introduction, states that we are a country saturated with fear. But he also states in his introduction, that all major religions warn about the dangers of excessive

fear and that people of faith have an important word to say to a fearful culture. And that we as followers of Jesus have a word or two to say about trusting in what we have or what we want over trusting in God. We are the Easter people! We are not locked in a room out of fear, we have experienced the Good News of the risen Christ, the church embodies the risen Christ, we have received the breath and blessings of peace so that we don't stand in fear. When we are at our best, we open our doors wide to the reality of our world, we hold onto that peace of Christ so that we are not paralyzed by fear and we walk out into the world sharing the good news with all. Sharing resurrection stories.

Which leads us back to Dr. Schade's article. She writes that we do need to remember those stories of eco-crucifixion, those martyrs killed while standing up for, trying to protect the earth. And then she goes on to say that this 'eco-crucifixion' is followed by eco-resurrection. Along with remembering the martyrs, she writes, let's tell the stories of new life. 'How in El Salvador, with the help of the Catholic Church, the people influenced the government to ban all metal mining in favor of protecting its fragile water systems. Mexico has moved to designate 160 million acres of land for environmental conservation. Underdeveloped countries that have not been able to develop power plants or energy from coal or oil are getting energy from wind and solar, possibly bypassing the dirty energy use that we have so depended on. Oh, there IS so much new life happening.

We stand on this Second Sunday of Easter and this Earth Day Sunday with two identities; we are the Easter people proclaiming new life and we are stewards of God's earth, called to support that which sustains and gives new life.

Back to the original question, "How does the creature say thanks?" Perhaps that is what being stewards, practicing stewardship is all about....our care, or giving, our stepping up, our concern, comes from a deep sense of gratitude. Our thanks for resurrection promise and earth's beauty come not just in the form of words but in our actions, our priorities, our way of life.