

April 18, 2010 – Third Sunday of Easter
Year C
By Michael Schut

(RCL) Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Today's scripture readings are replete with hopeful images and stories.

In today's psalm, David exalts God who has lifted him "out of the depths," healed him, and brought him "up from the grave." God turns David's "wailing into dancing."

In the reading from Revelation, millions of angels sing in a "loud voice." Imagine being there and hearing the preposterous thundering beauty of such a chorus, all singing praise to God's lamb, Jesus. And then imagine the rest of creation, "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea" joining the chorus!

Acts tells the story of Saul's conversion – from one issuing "murderous threats" against the early Christians to one proclaiming the gospel throughout the known world. If Saul can be converted, it seems safe to say, anyone of us could be as well.

Finally, the Gospel of John paints a beautiful picture. It's dawn. Jesus stands on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius. Seven of the disciples had been fishing the previous night. It must've been a calm morning as the disciples heard this stranger call to them from 100 yards away. He tells them to drop their nets one more time on the other side of the boat, and for the first time that night their nets fill to overflowing. What's even more hopeful than the great catch, of course, is that the murdered Jesus was alive, had been raised from the dead, and was there on the shore, roasting fish for them over an open fire.

It's appropriate that our readings today contain such images and stories of hope. After all, we have just celebrated Easter – we've gone through Lent to the unlikeliest outcome imaginable: that we are, along with Christ, raised from the dead; that a conversion like Saul's is possible for us as well; that we can be released from our own prisons and be made whole.

Following the celebration of Easter, Earth Day comes along. The timing, frankly, seems a little off. Those who proposed and celebrated the first Earth Day probably didn't consult the Christian calendar. If they did, they may well have chosen to mark Earth Day during the season of Lent.

Why Lent? Well, because Lent is often characterized by words like reflection, sacrifice, repentance. Lent is the time set aside to acknowledge our limits. After all, the season begins with a smudged cross on our foreheads and the reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are Earth and to Earth we shall return.

Earth Day needs to call us to a stance not unlike that of Lent: a day to reflect on how our own lives and our society's economic practices impact God's creation. A time to reflect on our own call in relationship to God's creation, human and non-human.

So what is our call here? It's perhaps the most foundational question to ask, for if we believe all of creation is simply here for our own use and abuse, then it doesn't really matter how our own lives or our economy impacts God's world.

So what is our role? Consider, for a moment, that it is to serve, not just other humans, but all of God's created order.

In the second chapter of Genesis we read that we were put in the garden to "till and keep" or to "work it and take care of it." If we take a look at the Hebrew word often translated as "till" or "work" or "cultivate," we find the word *abad*. *Abad* is the Hebrew word for "serve." It's the same word that shows up in the profound words of Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will *abad* the Lord" – meaning we will "serve" the Lord.

It's telling to note that, by and large, we humans don't think of "serve," as appears in that second chapter of Genesis, as the best descriptor of our role in relationship to God's Earth. Rather, it's safe to say that more of us think of "dominion," as appears in first chapter of Genesis. That's the more famous verse.

Let's briefly consider dominion. This verse was written within a Hebrew culture, and within that culture kings were those who had dominion. As Calvin DeWitt points out in his book *EarthWise*, a good Hebrew king exercised dominion with "mercy, justice and compassion" on behalf of his constituents.

Furthermore, as Christians, we proclaim Christ as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Christ has dominion. But Jesus was always turning things on their heads – including what it means to be a king with dominion. One of the places we see that most clearly is in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus says, "For even I ... came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

Our role here on God's good earth is to be servants of creation.

The litany of evidence suggesting our service is not going so well is indeed long.

Species, expressions of God's abundance and creativity and love, are going extinct at a rate not seen since the disappearance of the dinosaurs. They are disappearing at 1,000 to 10,000 times the "background rate" or natural extinction rate. Human activity, particularly habitat destruction, is the cause of such extinctions.

In 2005 the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment or "MA" was released. Carried out over a four-year period, the report brought together nearly 1,400 experts from 95 countries. The assessment focuses on the benefits people obtain from ecosystems – such as food, water, pollination, and climate regulation. The bottom line of the MA findings is that "human actions are depleting Earth's natural capital, putting such strain on the environment that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."

While the debate in the United States goes on, it's hard to look into the eyes of a Pacific Islander or Alaskan coastal native or Filipino farmer and say climate change is not real. Leaders of the Anglican Communion in the Philippines recently wrote the following in a letter to a justice network in the Diocese of Olympia:

"A year ago, our own Bishop of our Diocese of North Central Philippines, Rt. Rev. Joel A. Pachao, said in a meeting with some of our foreign partners, 'We are doing all these environmental stewardship programs so that you can continue to drive your SUVs.' It was an expression of anger ... over the fact that it is us in the so-called 'developing ... countries' who are suffering most from the effects of climate change which can be attributed to carbon ... emissions, the bulk of which are from the western developed countries."

It starts to become clear why it seems like Earth Day belongs in the season of Lent, marked by repentance and humility.

But isn't there something missing here?

Yes, there is; and it's the fact that Earth Day can also be a day of profound celebration. Think of all the beauty in the world: say, a newborn babe cradled in its mother's arms; a glacier lily springing up from underneath spring snow; a basket of fresh collard greens; a walk in your favorite place; a fresh corn tortilla; your favorite bird song; you and your community taking care of the green space at the end of your block.

All of this beauty and goodness is a gift from God and God's creation. The great ecologist E.O. Wilson believes we are all lovers of that creation; we are hardwired, he says, to love life. He calls this "biophilia."

Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently told an audience at Southwark Cathedral in London that people had allowed themselves to become "addicted to fantasies about prosperity and growth, dreams of wealth without risk and profit without cost."

Those fantasies have disconnected us from our innate biophilia. Williams contends that those fantasies lead to a lifestyle where the human soul was "one of the foremost casualties of environmental degradation." He went on to say:

"Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions of whom and what we are and their overall effect has been to isolate us from the reality we're part of. Our response to this crisis needs to be, in the most basic sense, a reality check."

So perhaps part of the really good news of Earth Day is that it offers the opportunity to heal our disconnection from that which we love so deeply. The distortions of who and what we are will begin to heal; we will reunite with that innate biophilia; no longer will we quiet the song of another species, or of a babe in arms. The angels and all the creatures surrounding the throne depicted in Revelations will be healed and proclaim praises in full voice.

May it be so. It may sound utopian, but it is something Jesus believed in so much that he was willing to die for it – for such will the Kingdom of God be like. Maybe Easter is, after all, an appropriate season for us to mark and celebrate Earth Day.

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