

Sermon

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April 23, 2017, Earth Day

John 20:19-31, Thomas Encounters the Resurrected Christ

Resurrection Signs

May the words spoken and the words received be only in your service, great God of Love.
Amen.

In the beginning was the Christ, and the Christ was with God and the Christ was God. The Christ was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Christ, and without the Christ nothing came into being. What came into being through the Christ was life.

In the beginning, the earth was without shape or form, and it was dark over the deep sea. The wind of the Christ swept over the water. The Christ said to the light, "Be." And so it was. The Christ said to the waters, "Separate above from below to create the sky." And the waters complied. The Christ then said to the waters, "Separate from the land and become the sea," and ocean became one, and land became many. The Christ called to plants and trees, and they came forth onto the land, and then separated the day from the night, ordering the seasons. The seas were alone, so the Christ called sea creatures into being. The sky was alone, so the Christ called the winged things into being. The land and vegetation were alone, so the Christ called every kind of animal and crawling thing into being, including humanity. And the Christ said, it was good. So very good.

The Christ became flesh, and dwelt among what had been created. ... At the beginning of his ministry John dipped him under the life-giving water of the Jordan River. Up from the water, gulping a deep breath into his emptied lungs, water dripping from his hair onto his face, a dove swooped above Jesus' head. A voice from Abba God revealed, "This is my beloved." Jesus became the Living Water, which no riverbanks could contain.

In Cana, six empty stone jars stood silently off to the side, waiting to become emissaries of Jesus' anointing. When the wine of the wedding reception had been depleted by the crowd, Jesus commanded that the jars be filled with water. When the liquid inside was dipped, it had transformed into wine, into the finest wine. This is the first sign in the Gospel of John where the glory of the Christ was revealed. And for this sign, the disciples believed.

There were seven such signs in John's Gospel. All related to the created world. Jesus honors the human body by healing the royal official's son, the paralytic on the mat, and the man born blind; by feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fish; and by raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Jesus showed himself to be the Word who from the created world came into being by walking across the water and calming the storm. He said, "I Am." I Am the one who is and who was and will be. And those who witnessed these signs said, "Surely this is the prophet who is coming among us. Surely this is the Messiah."

The Gospel's signs. Unbelievable to our 21st century sensibilities, right? But is it any more

implausible than the caterpillar who spins her own coffin from her body, dies to herself to become the butterfly, and knows what generation she is, whether coming or going on the thousands of mile's trek to Mexico and back? Or the prairie that dies under the flame to rise again with more life than before, in the blink of an eye?

Are these signs any more improbable than the human creation of the Cassini spacecraft that has had the capacity to explore Saturn for twenty-year? Or that we have learned that one of Saturn's moons has geysers and an ocean and another that is remarkably Earth-like? A news report this week states: "Together with Jupiter's moon Europa, which may also have an inner ocean, Cassini's findings taught us that there's really no such thing as a goldilocks zone—that life could be anywhere.

"We've really seen a paradigm shift—a shift in our thinking about where you might find life, in our own solar system, or any solar system," says Linda Spilker, a Cassini project scientist. "To think that maybe within our own solar system there might be these ocean worlds where life might have started completely independently from life on Earth... that's been a very big change in our thinking."¹

Or how easy is it to make sense of the fact that your stomach lining is new every few days, your skin is fully replaced every few weeks, and the cells of your bones are new each decade?²

How do we take this in, with all its wonder, yet still insist on our skepticism of the Word that was with God and was God, through whom all of this astonishing creation came into being? Our faith doesn't ask us to check science at the door. It doesn't insist on making the poetry of Genesis a textbook. It doesn't even ask us to create proofs of the miracle stories as we would a geometry theorem. Rather, our faith invites us to celebrate the Mystery into which our scientific minds inquire, and to acknowledge that we can discover process-after-process, only be led deeper into the Ultimate Mystery in which all dwells.

We contemporaries aren't the only ones who have a difficult time encountering Mystery.

After his crucifixion, Jesus visited his friends, as he had promised. The Temple will be rebuilt in three days, he'd said. Simon Peter and other disciples saw the empty tomb and the graveclothes lying there. Mary Magdalene had a conversation with Jesus in the Garden outside the tomb, whom she recognized as soon as he called her name. Then, when the disciples were gathered behind closed doors, afraid that they would be the next victims of the empire's wrath, Jesus appeared. He showed them the nail marks in his hands and the wound in his side. He said, "Peace be with you," and they believed.

But Thomas wasn't there. "Unless I, too, see the marks of the crucifixion in his body, I can't believe what you're saying," he told his friends. The next time Jesus appeared, Thomas was there. Jesus, knowing Thomas's need, invited him to look at his palms and put his hand into his side.

¹ <http://www.popsoci.com/nasa-cassini-mission-best-findings>

² <http://book.bionumbers.org/how-quickly-do-different-cells-in-the-body-replace-themselves/>

“My Savior and my God!” Thomas cried.

Jesus asked Thomas if he believed because he had seen, yet he knew the answer. “Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.” Really, Jesus? Is it so hard to understand that your friend would need proof of the impossible, the resurrection?

Perhaps the statement is meant for us, those who would come after, who would not be able to touch the wounds of Jesus’ palms and his side.

But we *have* seen resurrection, have we not? The buried bulbs whose flowers miraculously push from the soil every spring, with nothing needed from us. The energy of matter that never disappears, but only changes form. The bees, up to their knees in pollen, who flit from flower-to-flower and make the fruit of the trees possible.

Yet, humanity is so easily steeped in denial of resurrection and Mystery. We develop amnesia, forgetting even that we are connected to the creation story, that we are part of the land and sea and sky and creeping things and plants and animals and stars and planets. We are part of the resurrection narrative we see in creation because we are ... created.

In the latest *Christian Century Magazine*³, in an article titled “An invitation to wonder: Why we need Mary Oliver’s poetry,” the author writes that “Oliver’s poetry witnesses to a deep love of neighbor” ... and “seeking the well-being of others.” She “constructs poems that invite us to dwell in other habitations ... thoughtfully, more honorably, with more integrity and intentionality,” that “echoes the summons to stewardship and relationship issues at the beginning of Genesis.” Oliver “communicates the moral inclusion of all created matter ... the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents.” She shares the sensibilities of Thomas Berry and other naturalists, with language that affirms that “the universe consists of a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

In the Mary Oliver poem we heard today, “The Hermit Crab,”⁴ she writes that the shore of the sea is littered every night with pearly ornaments of death, from which the hermit crab chooses a home. “What a rebellion,” she writes, “to leap into it and hold on, connecting everything, the past to the future—which is of course the miracle.”

The Thomas of our Gospel reading, too, connects us to everything—to Christ the Word who was in the beginning, Christ in the barricaded room who bared his wounds to the disciples, and Christ in our midst who calls us into new life with every breath. Thomas connects us to our doubting *and* to our belief. His story invites us to look for real time evidence of resurrection, like the 600 and more marches all over the world yesterday which promoted science, celebrated Earth Day, and rejected humanity’s “othering” and abuse of the planet that has resulted in climate change and other injuries to the earth. We are all called to participate in Christ’s resurrection for one another and all of our neighbors in creation. The work of our hands today shows our love and respect for the patch of the planet known as Madison Christian Community. All these are signs of the Christ’s ongoing bidding into new and renewed relationships with the world’s non-human

³ April 26, 2017, “Invitation to Wonder: Why we need Mary Oliver’s poetry,” by Debra Dean Murphy, 20-25

⁴ Mary Oliver in *New and Selected Poems: Volume One*.

relatives.

We are two-thousand years' too late to touch Jesus's wounds, but we are right on time to see our own signs and wonders to be able to say, "My Savior and my God!"

May this Living Christ find a resurrection home in, through, and with us and the whole creation.
Amen.