

Earth Day at Union Church

April 24, 2022

“The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole earth.”

—from an ancient Latin mass

Here we are in Eastertide. I have always enjoyed the little known “tide” seasons of the church: Christmastide and Eastertide. These seasons that follow the two big “high” Sundays don’t get the respect they deserve. (You remember “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” right? That’s Christmastide.) The “tides” begin with what we in the business call “low” Sundays. We retired guys get a lot of requests for preaching on those first Sundays after Christmas and Easter. The main preacher takes a much-needed Sunday off, and you all get some unknown yokel jacklegs to fill in.

But Eastertide is worth celebrating, especially on this particular low Sunday when we observe Earth Day, too. Eastertide is the season during which Easter doesn’t go away. It is the time after the Resurrection and before Pentecost when lots of powerful risings are happening in the Gospels: Jesus appears to his disciples in risen form in many places. If we were following the lectionary, today’s Gospel reading would be John’s Doubting Thomas story. Luke’s version of it is the road to Emmaus, one of my favorites, where the risen Christ walks along with two disciples who are heading home; they are leaving Jerusalem downcast, after the arrest, trial, torture and death of their friend Jesus. Jesus joins their walk and talks with them about the things that trouble them. But they don’t recognize Jesus at first. At least, not until he is invited in to their Emmaus home and they break bread together. That’s the Eastertide message: inviting the stranger in, like the Poles opening their homes these days to more than two million Ukrainian neighbors, fleeing war in the East.

Eastertide is the time in the church year to underscore the truth that the Resurrection is ongoing. It is actually quite a beautiful thing that you are celebrating Earth Day on this otherwise “low” Sunday. You are marking this Sunday in Eastertide with critical significance. The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole earth. It doesn’t just lift Jesus from the tomb. It is that rising tide that lifts all boats.

It reminds me of Noah’s ark, that large boat of refuge from the greatest of storms in the ancient world: The Great Flood in Genesis. Now there was an extraordinarily extreme weather event, a rising tide that lifted all boats! (If you had one.) In the words of the psalmist, here God is working through Noah and his ark as a shield for the refugees of the Great Flood! Yes, God sent the flood, but God also provided an ark of refuge. That’s an Eastertide message that addresses the world’s predicament this Earth Day. Disaster isn’t just on its way. It is here. But God gives us means of escape, survival and new life.

We are at a point now with the global climate crisis that takes us beyond far away polar bears on shrinking ice at the poles and melting permafrost in remote Arctic places Up North. Now it is sinking islands and oceanside cities whose beaches are disappearing as vast shelves of Arctic and Antarctic ice collapse and melt into the seas. Extreme weather, floods and droughts, more

storms, interminable heatwaves. Global warming is no longer about some future possibility in a faraway place. It is upon us now. Here.

These rising tides are frightening, alarming, discombobulating. They alert us to the fact that we cannot keep doing what we have been doing, stomping across the planet with our oversized carbon footprints, pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This is no way to treat God's garden and our fellow creatures. But we can make a difference. We can reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, not only as nations and groups of nations with climate deals, but right here in this place: in our homes, workplaces, churches and schools. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels may be the greatest act of faith of our time. Ending the world's dependence on fossil fuels is to care for creation, our common home, as Pope Francis put it. It may be the moral equivalent of Noah's building that ark and taking with him and his family the animals of the earth. This very moment in time for action is propelled, as MLK put it, by "the fierce urgency of now." Now is the time. It is Kairos time, to use the Greek word that the evangelist Mark put in the mouth of Jesus as he kicked off his ministry. Now is the right time. Kairos. Or as one translation puts it, "Time is up."

It is the right Kairos time for doing everything within our means to reduce our carbon footprint now. It is the right Kairos time for taking whatever step is next, based on where we are now. This is the biggest contribution we can make. Doing something. We can get more efficiency out of our vehicles, whether we drive an EV, a hybrid or a gas guzzler. We can support public transportation. We can just drive and fly less. We can get more efficiency in our buildings, and we can power them with sustainable sources like wind and solar. We can adopt a "no mow May," and replace high maintenance lawns with pollinators and more sustainable natural grasses and indigenous plants. We can reduce consumption, and re-use and recycle more. We can say no thank you to those nasty ubiquitous plastic bags that every store wants to give us. We can do this. We can eat less meat, as Francis Moore Lappe urged us to do fifty years ago in her *Diet for a Small Planet*.

We can do this. We can make sure that our investment portfolios are at least guided by the principles of social responsibility, if not fully divested of fossil fuel-supporting funds. The divestment movement is now big financial news. More than 1,500 institutions have now divested fossil fuels from their portfolios, with \$50 trillion in new fossil fuel free investments. This is a good object lesson for our creation care stewardship: stop doing bad destructive things (divest), and instead invest in good sustainable things. As people of God, we are part of that rising Easter tide that lifts all boats. We can do this. God is doing this already. That is the heart of the Easter message, and the ongoing testimony of Eastertide.

It is easy to despair about big problems, and there simply is no bigger problem in our world than the climate crisis. When the latest report of the International Panel on Climate Change came out, I was like this, with my hands over my eyes, peeking through the cracks. Now what? I thought. I am thankful for the climate scientists, but there is just so much bad news that any of us can absorb. The crisis is a given, at least for me. I now want to look for the helpers, as Mr. Rogers advised our kids to do a generation ago. I want to learn more about and support the big new solar and wind power installations being built to replace coal and gas-fired power plants. I want to cheer on the development of electric and hydrogen vehicles.

I am inspired by those individuals and communities that resist new oil wells, fracking, and piping dirty tar sands oil across our watersheds. (Google “Enbridge Line Five.”) I am encouraged by people with European roots like me who are learning indigenous ways of caring for the earth as if she really is our Mother. I am touched by fellow tree huggers who increasingly recognize all forms of life as sacred. I am thrilled that there are young people like Greta Thunberg and old people like Al Gore and John Kerry, and people in between like Katherine Hayhoe. We are blessed in Wisconsin to claim the late Gaylord Nelson who helped get the first Earth Day going 52 years ago, and his daughter Tia Nelson, who has perpetuated her father’s legacy.

Our conference creation care team has made Kairos Call to Action grants available to fourteen Wisconsin congregations in the past two years, and those churches have installed solar, upgraded heating, ventilation and lighting, converted lawns to prairies, bought a dishwasher to get away from disposable plastic dinnerware, and planted lots of trees! I am inspired by these actions, and our creation care team is poised to incentivize more churches, even Union here in Green Bay, to take whatever next green steps are in front of you.

Eastertide is a 50-day celebration of the joy of the Resurrection that renews the whole earth. This Resurrection tide of joy lifts my spirits and points to what the Triune God has done and is doing, as we ponder the climate crisis and ask ourselves “what would Jesus do?” God is at work in our world, if we have eyes to see it and ears to hear about it and hands to dig in with.

The Deists among our national Founders believed that God wound up the world like a clock at creation, and set it to run itself. The traditions of the United Church of Christ, on the other hand, worshiped a God who was a bit more involved in the world than that, and in an ongoing way. Our forbears in faith, the founders of Union Church, included Abolitionists, who saw in every movement for freedom the hand of God. God didn’t just create us and our world. Creation wasn’t a one-off. Creation was and is ongoing. It is a season. Creationtide, let’s call it.

Our mission is to celebrate what God is doing and keep lifting those boats. The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole earth. Creationtide. Eastertide. Yesterday. Today. Forever.

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Psalm 18; Genesis 6:14-16, 21
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