

# Heal My Earth

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, April 26 2009

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It was twenty-five years ago, in the summer of 1984, and I was on vacation in the town of Eastham, on Cape Cod. I had already been ordained for twenty-five years, and had undergone the many and varied experiences that accompany ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. I had known the heights of inspiration and the depths of sorrow that are so much a part of sharing people's life journeys day by day.

I had sat with parents mourning the loss of a young child, had been present at numerous deathbeds, had preached countless sermons, performed many weddings and baptisms. I had seen most of the aberrations of human behavior that one can imagine. My ministry had taken me to large and small churches, to urban and suburban settings, to involvement with social issues from mental health to civil rights.

Yet with all of my experiences at that point in my life, I was still surprised by that quiet morning on Cape Cod. I was walking alone along one of the shore roads, as was my custom, at six o'clock in the morning. It was a lovely Cape day in late summer, with the early sunlight glinting on the Bay, and bird songs the only sound to be heard.

As I walked over a particular stretch of the road leading to First Encounter Beach, I was thinking about my own journey through life— the places I had been and the things I had done. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with the sense of a Presence. I don't really know how to describe it. It wasn't my rational mind that perceived the Presence— perhaps it was my sixth— or seventh— sense.

It was like that eerie feeling that you sometimes get in a dark place, where the hair actually stands up on your arms, as you imagine something terrible there in the dark with you— except that this time it was neither dark nor terrible. I was aware with an overwhelming certainty that someone was walking along with me— a few steps behind and to my right. Because of the depth of the feeling, I had no doubt who it was.

Back in my early years, when I had experienced an intense religious conversion, I had sensed for a moment what I *knew* to be the Presence of the living Christ. But that had been thirty years before, and though I had known deep moments of inspiration in my ministry, nothing had been as powerful as that first experience. Yet here I was, walking along a road on Cape Cod, and that same overwhelming Presence had returned. I said, "Is it really you?" I heard no voice reply, but I knew the answer with all of my being. And I just kept on walking.

I walked for a distance of about fifty yards, with this overwhelming sense of the Risen Christ beside me. In those moments I felt my life's journey affirmed. In that state of awareness, there was nothing to do but to *be* and *walk*. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the Presence was gone. There was no doubt in my mind that I had experienced once more the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ.

As I stood on a bluff overlooking Cape Cod Bay, I saw the sand spits stretching out into the blue water. A lone seagull flew past me, heading to-wards the East. At one with this lovely, natural scene I felt, rather than heard, a quiet voice say to me, echoing in my mind— "Heal My Earth". It was at that point that my focus of ministry shifted to environmental concerns. And it is the echo of that voice, rather than some philosophical or political agenda, that has kept me engaged for the decades since in searching for ways to bring healing to God's Creation.

Why do I tell this story on the third Sunday of Easter Day in 2009? Because I am convinced that the Reality I experienced on the road on Cape Cod is the same Reality that underlay the experiences of the early disciples, as they recovered from the horror of the crucifixion. When I think back over my life, it is those times of breakthrough that stand out as pivotal moments which have changed the direction of my journey. There is no doubt in my soul that they were utterly, utterly real! And therefore I have no doubt at all that the disciples experienced what we know as the Resurrection.

I also tell this story today because we have this week celebrated Earth Day in the national and international community. And it is fitting that, given the sense of calling I have received to issues of environmental healing, this should be my last sermon as interim rector of St. Mark's Church. In his talk to members of our parish during Lent, the Rev. Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith told us that it is his experience that many have found experiences of God in nature during their lives, but seldom speak about it.

The human race had such an experience collectively, just forty years ago.

I am speaking of the landing of human beings on the moon-- and, most especially, of the image of the Earth from space which that voyage produced. NASA pictures of that image have become standard fare in our popular culture. It has worked its way into the formal worship of the Episcopal Church.

"This fragile Earth, our island home" as a phrase in our 1979 Prayer Book, is a direct result of that 1969 venture into space. The image of the Earth seen for the first time from such a distance as a beautiful blue globe surrounded by a changing gossamer of white clouds moved us beyond our intellects and struck deeply into our hearts, taking on the power of a vital, living symbol.

It brought with it not only a sense of the beauty and fragility of life on our planet, but also a perception of what it means that all life here is inter-connected and interdependent. The atmosphere, the oceans, the land masses and the biosphere are seen from this perspective as part of the same beautiful dance of planetary being.

But in our day this very interconnectedness has brought a threat to life on the planet it has never known before. The human impact on the environment has been dramatic and unprecedented. Each year scientists are more alarmed at the prospect of global warming. The destruction of systems from the ozone layer to the oceans is increasingly documented, along with an extinct-ion level of species unknown since the days of the dinosaurs, and the future quality of life on the planet is in real doubt.

We now face immense problems which should be of concern all Christians. The reason for our concern may be found in our scriptures, and in the belief that Jesus whose life, passion and resurrection we celebrate at Easter was indeed an earthly manifestation of the divine Creator. The prologue of the Gospel according to John identifies Jesus as one with the Word, the Divine Logos, the spirit of creation that brooded over the face of the deep at the very beginning. "Without him was

not anything made that was made", writes John. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him."

This is the cosmic dimension of the Christ spirit, which is being rediscovered in theology today. To affirm this dimension of Christ is not to deny the reality or power of the historic Jesus and his sacrifice. But it carries us past his humanity to his essence-- the energy of life itself.

Whatever the eternal and mysterious truth may be that echoes in this passage, we can see the importance of its message to our present situation. For the Earth and its life-forms are threatened today precisely because the human race has ignored the message of the scriptures. We have chosen to reject the way of stewardship and have accepted instead the way of domination and exploitation. And as Christians, many of us have forgotten that for us the true bottom line is the worship of the Creator and service to the entire human community. Our failure to recognize that the Earth and its natural resources may itself have a bottom line has led us to a sad and dangerous situation.

In the last decades of our history in the United States, basic human values that have governed our lives for centuries have finally given way to the lust for profit. The gap between the rich and poor in the world grows exponentially, as the industrialized nations consume more and more of nature's resources at the expense of the developing nations. The natural environment suffers at the hands of those who would reap financial gain at the expense of the ecosystems which have given us all life.

And make no mistake about it. Here in the United States, this is not a Republican or a Democratic issue. Both political parties have failed miserably in planning for a future which will be sustainable for the planet, and will provide a measure of quality of life for all of God's people.

Those of us who care about the future of our children and grandchildren should be vitally concerned about the present movement away from environmental responsibility as a result of the efforts of special interest groups. Our concern comes not only from our anxiety about the future, but from our love of God the Creator.

For we affirm our faith in Jesus of Nazareth as a human being whose love for the creation poured forth in his preaching and in his parables. The birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the mustard seed, the fields ripe for harvest, fish of the sea and the wind of the storms were the images of his message. He saw in the eyes of children-- all children-- the soul of the human race, the windows on eternity. He was himself, as we are, a part of the created order which he loved and came to heal.

But we worship also Christ as the Word of God, the divine energy of creation from the dawn of the universe, the Cosmic Being through whom all things were made, the origin and the source of life. And in both manifestations- as human being and as divine word, the Jesus we seek to serve cries out to us through the present agony of the Earth itself. May we seek through study, commitment, prayers and action to respond to this cry.