

Earth Sunday, April 22, 2007  
Our Unrecognized Creation

When I think of the earth, I always think of my father. My father was a geologist and a great lover of nature. As a small child it was easy for me to mistake my father for God, maybe even more than most kids. Because he was the one that told me about the mountains and the glaciers and the forests and the great boulders and the sun and the moon, and what they were all made of. He was the one who told me about granite, slate, sandstone and obsidian. He would take us all to gorgeous natural wonders- mountains, forests, oceans. He would show us a tiny garnet that had formed on the tip of a great mound of granite on a mountaintop, or how a perfectly round pothole in a great bolder in the Shenandoah Valley produced a perfectly round stone inside it. He talked about granite (his personally favorite rock) so much that when I first heard of taking someone for granite, I thought it meant mistaking them for a large gray rock, and I could see how that would offend them.

He took us to Assateague Island off the coast of Maryland and Chincoteague off the Virginia coast where we watched the wild ponies run. He took us to beautiful quarries in the Maryland woods filled with rainwater so treacherously deep and so freezing cold that the thrill of the immanent danger somehow enhanced the beauty for us.

He showed us the breath-taking grandeur of the Appalachian Mountains, making sure we knew exactly how they were formed. And unlike the student in Al Gore's film, I knew for sure that the continents fit together like puzzle pieces from the time I was five. He took us to the glorious beaches of the Maryland/ Delaware shore- Bethany Beach with its ghostly row of lighthouses and Rehoboth with its powerful waves and wonderful scruffy sand dunes. We camped a lot. My father even liked to camp in the snow, and he would take us to the beach even if a storm was threatening. I began to get an impression of a glorious, gorgeous, seemingly endless abundance and beauty- fresh, cold, wild, limitless abundant life, long before I ever heard about Jesus.

My father, the confirmed atheist, accidentally gifted me with a deep spirituality through his great love of creation. My mom finished off the job by taking me to church when I was 8. But I felt my first stirrings of the holy

as I walked through tall trees on the way to fetch our food out of an ice-cold creek while we were camping in the mountains of New Hampshire. Surrounding me, singing along with me, lifting up my child's heart as I skipped along, I felt something as huge as the sun and as familiar as my own soul. I knew God was right there- was all around me.

This still recurs for me every time I find myself walking down a wooded path, birds singing and nature glorying around me, and I feel myself being fed by the great roaring pristine abundance of the air, the trees and the sun.

As we talked with the bishop this past week those of us who were clergy in Marin had to admit that the secular world was way ahead of us in stewardship of the earth- in awareness of the fragility of the planet, and the vital importance of sustainability. But our bishop suggested that perhaps there was a place for us in this holy work. He urged us to open people's eyes to the holiness of creation, to recognize the sacredness of our duty toward it- to make it Holy work. And perhaps can be our job as Christians in this post-Christian culture

In our reading of today, and in almost every story of Jesus after the resurrection, Jesus is at first unrecognizable. In the road to Emmaus story, he walks right long with the disciples and they take him for a stranger. In a post-resurrection story from the gospel of Luke, Jesus suddenly appears to them saying, "Peace be with you," and they think he is a ghost.

In the appearance to Mary Magdalene, she is just fresh from a conversation with two angels, when Jesus addresses her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" How in the world could she fail to recognize him? He stood before her. He spoke to her. And yet she mistakes him for ...the gardener (John 20: 11-18). And in our Gospel story today, after fishing all night and catching nothing, having lost their beloved teacher to a torturous death, another dawn was breaking for the disciples, perhaps not unlike that first Easter morning. A stranger is standing on the beach and calls out to the bedraggled disciples, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" And they don't recognize him.

They take him for some anonymous fisherman, just as Mary took him for some anonymous gardener. And we have mistaken our precious planet earth for our own personal garden, our own personal harvest of fish. There is unimaginable abundance in this world of ours, but it is not, alas, infinite.

Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of John begins with unimaginable abundance- the turning of vast amounts of water to vast amounts of very fine wine. This miracle brought forth the first recognition of who Jesus was. And John's gospel ends with a great miracle of abundance as well- the vast amounts of fish that allow the befuddled disciples to at last recognize the risen Christ.

I believe that we have to be the miracle that wakes up our own souls, because Jesus has no other hands or feet than ours at this point. St. Francis took Jesus literally when he said- "Go forth and preach the Gospel to all creation." And so Francis preached to the birds, the rocks, to insects. He took care of his fellow creatures, moving a tiny worm off of a path and out of harm's way, saving a wolf from being murdered by the town folk. Francis also said "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words."

It is this gospel of no words that we need to preach- this cruciform willingness to have less and love more. To recognize the amazing extent to which we really are part of the whole, and what we do does make an enormous difference.

Here is a quote from a theologian you are all familiar with:

Human beings are part of a whole, called by us "the universe." A part limited in time and space. However, they regard themselves, their ideas and their feelings as separate and apart from the rest. It is something like an optical illusion in their consciousness. This illusion is sort of a prison: it restricts us to our personal aspirations and limits our affective life to few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison, opening up our circle of compassion in order to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty.

This is from the writings of that wild eco-feminist, Albert Einstein.

In a really annoying twist of fate, I am now commuting for the first time in my life. Just as the severity of Global warming has really hit my consciousness, I am driving my vintage Volvo 35 miles every time I come to work, packing ever more carbon into our fragile atmosphere. There must be a reason this is happening to me at this time. I have to assume that God is giving me my wake-up call. I am staring Jesus right in the face and not

seeing him. I am living in the little bubble of illusion that what I do has only to do with me.

In our reading from Acts, we hear the beautiful story of Paul's road to Damascus experience. He had been a proud pious Jewish man- well versed in all the scriptures, utterly sure of himself. And in his great assurance he was a leader in the persecution of those upstart heretics, who belonged to "The Way," as early Christianity was then called. But on the road to Damascus, Paul had a profound experience of the risen Christ. Right in the middle of his commute, he fell flat on his face. His previous blindness turned into real blindness, and he had to continue on being led by the hand, stumbling along unseeing. He kept on going in his journey to Damascus, but in a very different way for a very different reason. He went to meet his teacher.

Because we have not been able to recognize and treasure the glorious abundance that we have been gifted with, we are in danger of losing it. But who will be our teacher? Who will lift the scales from our eyes? I believe our own lives must be our teacher. The glory of nature must be our teacher. And our growing awareness of our harm we do to that glorious abundance must be our teacher. And God will surely open our eyes and God will surely help us as we preach the wordless gospel and walk the sacred way of cherishing and protecting this unimaginably abundant Earth for ourselves, each other and our children.

Amen.