“All Things Growing Together”

Psalm 8 Acts 3:12-19 Luke 24:36b-48

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First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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What’s your story? How have you gotten to where you are now? What is it that has shaped your opinions, attitudes, and assumptions about life? Do your actions accurately reflect your inner beliefs? What kind of experiences have you had? Are these shared by others? Are you worried, are you fearful, do you recognize, or resist changes? Are you content, or do the challenges of the world seem overwhelming?

I just asked a series of questions. They move from the personal, “What’s your story?” to the global, “challenges of the world.” This morning’s scripture readings have detailed stories of specific people mentioned by name, like Peter, Abraham, Pilate, and Jesus. At the same time, these people are immerse in context, a mix of background, or meta-narratives that play out over large archs of history, like God creating the moon and the stars.

Here we are today, in this moment, and we celebrate as an Earth Care congregation themes of care. God’s good creation, stewardship, how to live in ways that honor what God has made. From the detailed and specific, to the larger, overarching realities, we can say things like Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and link personal actions to global concerns: act locally, think globally. But how do these slogans become more than words, more than lofty thoughts or idealist sentiments? To answer this, we can also ask other questions: what happens under the ground when a seed is planted? What takes place in the dark depths of soil to actualize sprouts of life? How does a new plant know the way to the sun? Are the nutrients and moisture given from a benevolent universe and supplied when needed? Does a single seed participate in the larger circle of life, and what happens when one grain falls to the ground as life’s cruciform pattern is embodied?

Psalm 8 reminds us the work of God’s fingers includes “the moon and the stars” and God’s name is majestic in all the earth. God is sovereign, and cares for humanity, even while calling humans to take care of the larger creation, the Earth, to exercise dominion, which is the responsibility of tending the works of God’s hands. This involves the personal level and we know it also includes a global scale.

Look at Peter in the Acts of the Apostles, he addresses the people and accuses them of rejecting “the Holy and Righteous One,” because they asked instead “to have a murderer” released. Peter tells them what happened. Yet what he’s accuses them of, he also did. As we read his scathing litany, in the back our our minds, we remember that Peter rejected Jesus three times before the cock crowed. So when he says, “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers,” there’s something about that knowing. He knows because he also denied Jesus and was involved in the killing of the Author of Life.

What is it about this knowing? This is more than a mental knowing, for Peter lived it, experienced it, and suffered through it. This is a felt-sense, an experiential knowing with more than the mind, but also the body and the soul and the heart. And in calling the Israelites to turn to God, to repent and have their sins wiped out, the meaning of this call is tangible to him; he’s already done this. Peter ran away from Jesus, wept bitterly after the cock crowed three times. Forgiveness is something Peter knows quite well, from God, and for himself and others. In that sense, he’s not so scathing, but speaks from love.

In Luke, Peter is among the disciples as Jesus appears and says, “Peace be with you.” They are all startled, “terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost,” and that’s after Jesus offers them peace. Jesus asks them why they are afraid, why their hearts doubt? This echoes the questions the questions to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, and the post-resurrection appearances continue. Jesus has them touch the wounds on his hands and feet, to see that he has flesh and bones. Then they have a mix of disbelief and wondering, yet also a sense of joy. It seems, that’s where we live, much of the time: trusting yet wondering, joyful but concerned, thankful although worried, caught between seeking a utopia while assuming distopia, the desire to be optimistic, but pessimism comes so easy. The details of the disciples with the Risen Lord parallel dynamics we experience in life.

Thankfully this extends through the end of the passage, where Jesus opens their minds, shows the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms are all fulfilled, and they understand the scriptures like never before. How does this happen? They are now witnesses to God’s creative action in Christ, and the tone is entirely different than before.

Something happened in between their confusion and their understanding, their fears and superstitions, and their confidence and commissioning. Something becomes a pivot point in this passage, something archetypal that includes us. We see peoples’ personal experiences and larger meta-narratives of God’s creation unfolding as they interweave. What is this pivot point?

Jesus eats fish. Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish. He asks if they have something to eat, and the disciples, now apostles, offer him a piece of fish and “he ate it in their presence.”

What a total turn around from the prophet Jonah. Remember him? He gets swallowed and spends three days in the belly of a fish. Now, Jesus, after three days in the tomb, he puts fish in his belly. Is this symbolism? Does Luke write this as a literary construct to illustrate through story the fulfillment of the law and prophets in Jesus?

Some people point out that his detail of eating fish is just a way to prove that he’s in the flesh, Jesus appears in a real body, resurrected, someone that can physically eat. At some level this is true, it does show that. At other levels, stories are ricocheting all over the place! Remember when Jesus called the first of his disciples and said, “Come, follow me and I’ll show you how to fish for people?” They left their nets and followed him. Now they are giving him a piece of broiled fish. And the timing is important. It’s while they are joyful yet in disbelief, still wondering, unable to see the full picture that he asks “Have you anything here to eat?” Even in this state, they are able to produce it. They do have something. They did learn how to provide nourishment, what to do beyond catching fish, and what they offered made a difference, offered fulfillment. “He took it and ate it in their presence.”

Just a small detail, part of the scene, setting the stage. But there’s more because everything’s connected. This piece of fish came from the sea. The very sea which God has put under the care of humanity. This fish is a piece of the larger creation. The details unite with the meta-narrative, just as our lives are linked with God’s purposes, in and through the cosmic Christ revealed in Jesus.

So often we take our slice, our piece, our perspective on life and assume that is reality. Our perception becomes not only our truth, but we reject anything that doesn’t measure up to this, or other perspectives that see things different. Yet here is Jesus in the presence of the disciples, embodying the link between Resurrection glory and all the details of the larger creation. The Incarnation is shared, whether in the last meal he had with them in breaking bread and telling them that they eat his flesh given for them, or here on a beach as they give him piece of fish, and as he eats it, in their presence. Presence is a gift from the depths. What is eated becomes part of the eater as it is taken up in the body. This small detail as Jesus eats fish shows connection, that the macrocosm, the meta-narrative and every-thing and every-one are united. You are never separate.

Eating fish becomes the hinge, and everything before it shows the disciples as fearful, confused, and isolated. Everything after shows understanding, fulfillment, presence, and Resurrection promise.

What this has to do with an Earth Day theme gets back to the question, “What happens under the soil as things are planted?” Another way to expand this garden question is to spiritualize it, and ask, “Do we trust inner experience, or not? Do we recognize the Risen Christ not only in our midst as a community of faith and the larger world, but in our own heart? Do we presume separation, and allow sin, which is the illusion of separation, to have it’s way with us and keep us confused, wondering, and caught in perspectival thinking that projects the limits of our egoic understanding as the only judge of what’s true? Inner experience, meeting God in the depths of our soul, resting in silence, sets these boundaries aside and shows us that we do have something to offer and share with the Risen Christ. We can link the specific, details of our lives, the small decisions and actions, with larger purposes based on experiencing the power of love, the tenacity of life, the presence within us that is larger than ourselves.

The environmental movement will have no effect if it’s legislative and based on government policies, lawsuits, and regulations. The the Earth will continue to suffer as industry and culture and individual human beings go through a process of fragmentation based on the assumption of separation. But if, like the forgiven Peter, we experience and learn by living, by trusting inner experience held in the love of God, then, engagement wakes us up to the unity of all creatures, the connected presence of Christ in all things, from the depths of the sea to the farthest star. From that felt-sense, which is faith and more than conceptual thinking, from a heart-and-soul-level, humanity treats the Earth much better. When humanity wakes up to divinity, humanity realizes that the Earth is us; how we treat the Earth is how we treat ourselves, and how we express as created beings our love for God.

The Risen Christ, who eats a piece of broiled fish, invites us re-learn our own connection with everything else, seen and unseen, filled with Presence. We are witnesses, we are stewards, sent in God’s name to live in joy, to open our hearts and allow God to transform our mind. Thanks be to God for humble and vulnerable love, glorified in the Risen Christ, now, even as forever. Amen.