

April 21, 2019
Easter Sunday
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Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
John 20:1-18

On an intellectual level, I know that *Easter* isn't synonymous with *spring*. After all, not every Christian lives in the northern hemisphere, and for everyone below the equator, it's autumn. These facts reach my head but not my heart, and therefore I can't quite uncouple *Easter* from *spring*.

Maybe that's okay. As explained in the note about today's liturgy on the front page of your service bulletin, the word "Easter" derives from the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. Well, that's according to *one* person, an eighth-century English monk. His is the only historical mention of this particular goddess, but recent linguistic studies find her plausible.

Of course she's plausible. Christmas coincides with a season of early pagan celebration, so why not Easter? Every year at this time, a miracle unfolds, and human hearts overflow with a joy that demands to be shared, one way or another. This week, I heard a number of people excitedly exclaim over the seemingly overnight bursting forth of cherry blossoms and maple leaves. Together we wondered how it could be that we had watched and waited to witness the changing, and still we missed it. With or without us, the miracle occurred, the work of a power greater than ourselves.

Our enchantment is evidence that we are of nature, even when our awareness of that reality goes underground. Like every human before us, we exist in relationship with the world that coughed us up. We depend on the earth for every thing we need—which is to say, we depend on the earth for our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Our attention may wander, but spring carries us back, reconnecting us to our source via the mystery of resurrected life.

At my home, yard work beckons, but we have made it a point *not* to disturb our winter-ragged flower beds just yet. We read that it's best not to rush, to wait just a little longer, giving the beneficial insects resting there more time to wake up and get out.

Sometimes an extra night or two is all it takes. Apparently Jesus needed two nights for whatever it was that happened during the winter of his death. You have to wonder what went on in that tomb from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning. Imagine the body of Jesus: slathered in oil, pungent with spices, shrouded in cloth, a cocoon cocooned in cool stone, not even a moonsliver of light to add texture to the darkness.

Have you ever watched a video of the lifecycle of the monarch butterfly? The transformation from caterpillar to chrysalis to adult is awesome—and not a little unsettling. Hanging head-down, it squirms and ripples, shedding first one and then a second skin, changing shape and color, and finally unfurling its wings in a display a delicate beauty.

Was it like that for Jesus? Before shedding layers of linen and flesh, he must have changed in ways awesome—and not a little unsettling. Finally Jesus emerged from flesh, shroud, and tomb, no longer human but something else, a being still in transition, on his way back to that from which he came. Of course Jesus is at first unrecognizable to Mary Magdalene.

Mary probably isn't at the top of her game. She was probably awake all night and finally decided to trudge her grief-weary body to the tomb. Arriving before first light and alarmed by what she finds, she then footraces to the disciples' hangout and back. Exhausted, peering into the tomb, does she realize she is talking to angels? Surely by now morning has broken the horizon. She turns away from the tomb and there is Jesus, eclipsing the sun to a halo of light. With the shift from darkness to brightness, Mary's eyes would need time to adjust. With everything that has happened, Mary's mind would need time to adjust. Still, recognize him she does, and with only a little prompting. "I have seen the Lord."

So often, we are Mary looking into the tomb. If we're lucky, there are angels and discarded cloth to help us understand what is happening. So often, there are not. So often, there is only bare rock and unbroken night and paralyzing isolation. Remembering Mary's lead, we turn, and that's when we find God, alive and speaking.

The story of Jesus began as a new addition to an older story, that older story being God's creating power and saving mercy. It's a love story, really, because God created for the love of it and loves what God created. It cannot be denied that humans have sometimes been a challenging part of God's creation. Still, no matter what, the scriptures tell us that God repeatedly reached out to set things right. Christians confess that it is through Jesus Christ that God reached out most intimately.

We often hear that Jesus died for our sins. Another way to think of it is that Jesus lived for our salvation. And by salvation, I don't mean that Jesus had to suffer in order to pay off the debt that we personally and individually owe to God because of our own misbehavior. Jesus as Jewish would have understood the most essential story of God's salvific power to be that of Israel's rescue from slavery in Egypt. The issue wasn't that the Israelites had done something wrong. The issue was that they were living in bondage to oppression.

That's not what God wanted for them. It's not what God wants for anyone or anything. Humans occupy a special place, but God's loving concern is for all of creation; God is redeeming all of creation. You might say that, in a way, the entire world was in that tomb with Jesus. The entire world has been transformed, *and* the entire world is still in transition.

As to what we might do about it, it is from Jesus' life that we take cues for our life. These days we exalt connectivity of the electronic variety, but the essence of our being depends on connectivity of a different sort. As a corrective, we might think of ourselves as rather like trees—rooted to the soil, reaching for the sky, and, as we now know, helping one another.

Tomorrow is Earth Day. The need for an Earth Day becomes more imperative every year, as humanity's impact on the environment yields results that are increasingly dire. While recognizing God's initial creating power, Christians haven't always included the rest of God's creation among the objects of God's saving mercy. It's past time to repair that oversight.

If we're in need of inspiration, we might turn to pioneering naturalist John Muir. In what we might hear as a celebration of resurrection life, he wrote this:

One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of Nature—inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait for the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.¹

As a priest, I often hear confessions, not from parishioners, but rather from perfect strangers. When I am out and about in my clergy collar, people say this to me: "I'm spiritual but not religious; I find God in nature." I get it; after all, I'm religious *and* spiritual, and I find God in nature. I expect that every one of us finds God in nature.

Of course we do. The arc of Judeo-Christian history and theology is firmly rooted in God's creation. *We* are firmly rooted in God's creation. This is something that we desperately need to claim and proclaim. It's not too late. If we are feeling discouraged, perhaps spring is a helpful restorative.

It may very well be that the best way for us to tell the story of the resurrection is by using imagery from the nature that is close to us. We might even incorporate the science that only glorifies its mystery.

Here's one small contribution. Our across-the-street neighbors have a thick row of bright yellow daffodils along the front of their house. This year I finally noticed that all those daffodil blossoms face my house. Investigating, I learned something new: that all the flowers in a bed of daffodils tend to face the same direction—the sunniest direction.

Like Mary, we look into the tomb; like Mary, we turn toward the light. On this Feast of the Resurrection, we are daffodils, faces open to the sun.

Notes

¹ John Muir, in Anne and Jeffery Rowthorn, *God's Good Earth: Praise and Prayer for Creation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2018), 286.