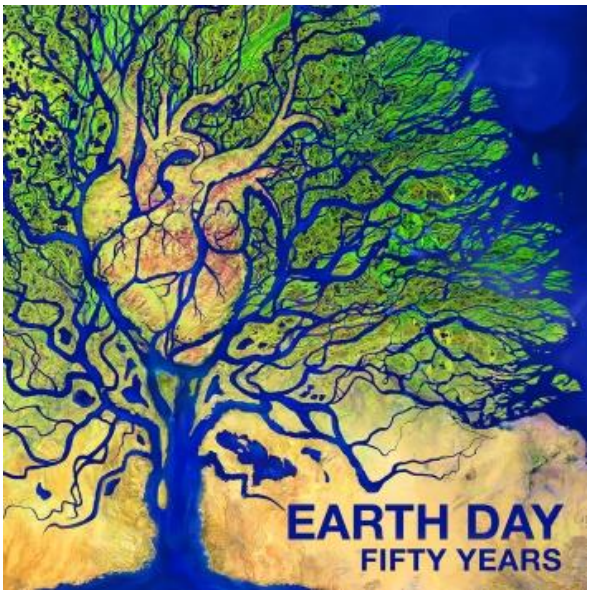
April 26, 2020
The Third Sunday of Easter, Year A **Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17**
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert **Acts 2:14a, 36-41**
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT **Luke 24:13-35**

[Note: This sermon was preached during a Zoom worship service, and incorporates images and video clips that were shared with participants. Follow the provided links to see them.]

Let me open by mentioning one of my dreams for St. Thomas's: the installation of an A/V system in the sanctuary. An A/V system would turn our church into a lovely community lecture space, be a useful tool for the Day School, and allow me to use audio and visual elements in my sermons. Zoom preaching offers me the opportunity to do something like that, and so I'm giving it a try today. This is a bit of an experiment, so please bear with me through any technical difficulties that may arise.

[Display the following image.]



A welcome intrusion into the pandemic news this week was provided by the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. We'd been planning to mark the occasion here at St. Thomas's the weekend of May 3, with events including our three-choirs offering. Hopefully we'll be able to hold that event in the fall, when we're also anticipating our first observance of what's called the Season of Creation. Churches substitute the Season of Creation into the liturgical calendar during the long "green" season after Pentecost, usually from September 1 to October 4. It has been observed by Christians around the world, and has been endorsed by faith leaders including Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Pope Francis.

Day School Chaplain Will Parker's former church in San Antonio is a big observer of the Season of Creation. An email query to the rector yielded this reply:

> Season of Creation has been celebrated here at Church of Reconciliation for the past 5+ years and has taken on amazing and creative expressions. Artwork, dance, poetry, nature conservancy classes, [guest preachers/teachers], film series, book studies, picnic in the parks, service projects in the San Antonio area with community gardens in areas of the city considered "food deserts"… on and on…. We have 25 community garden beds on campus here which we share with the neighborhood.[1]

We won't reaching that high to start, but we are hoping to partner in some way with Edgerton Park Conservancy and to host an art show using the new flexible art hanging system in the sanctuary. Know that volunteers are needed to help pull it all together. It's hard to imagine how life is going to unfold between now and then, but it's still important to look ahead.

The Earth received a pretty great accidental Earth Day gift, courtesy of the worldwide pandemic-flattening stay-home orders. As an April 9 NASA article observed, "Over the past several weeks, the Northeast United States has seen significant reductions in air pollution over its major metropolitan areas. Similar reductions in air pollution have been observed in other regions of the world."[2] That article specifically addressed nitrogen dioxide, an air pollutant that comes primarily from burning fossil fuels. It included the video I'm going to show you. It's really a slideshow consisting of six slides, one for each year from 2015 to 2020, and for that year showing the average atmospheric nitrogen dioxide for the month of March. Again, think average nitrogen dioxide for March of that year.[3]

[Show NASA $N0_2$ March 2015-2020 Visualization Video]

Of course all in-person Earth Day events had to be canceled or postponed, but there were a lot of online options. Speaking of NASA, on Wednesday I watched the short documentary film *Earthrise*.[4] It tells the story of the making of this photograph.

[Display the following image.]

Astronaut William Anders captured this image from the Apollo 8 spacecraft on December 24, 1968.[5] Remember, Apollo 8 was the first space mission that took astronauts all the way to the moon. After a three-day voyage from Earth, they orbited the moon ten times in 20 hours. On orbit number four, they looked out the window and were brought up short by the sight of the Earth rising over the lunar landscape. After getting hasty help locating a roll of color film to put in the camera, Anders took this photo.

The *Earthrise* documentary was released in 2018 to mark the photo's 50th anniversary. It includes archival footage of the astronauts being interviewed on the TV news program *Face the Nation* shortly after their return in 1968, and then being interviewed for the film in 2018. I'm going to show you the last few minutes of the film.[6]

[Show Earthrise *clip, starting at 25:35 and to the end.]*

I haven't given up the hope that was revealed through that image. I am a child of that era, six years old when those men were orbiting the moon, and eight years old on that first Earth Day. Maybe that's why for quite some time I wanted to be either an astronaut or a forester. Apparently I am still that person. After all, today I'm talking about outer space; two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, I mentioned Suzanne Simard, the biologist who discovered that trees in a forest communicate with one another. With her we move from the macroscopic to the microscopic: as she describes the forests she studies, "there would be hundreds of miles of a fungal network buried under a single footstep."[7]

Microscopic to macroscopic to microscopic—I think there is something in that rocking back-and-forth. Knowing that the Earth is insignificant only makes it more uniquely precious. Knowing that we humans are dangerously susceptible to the effects of a tiny virus only increases the value of our Earthy existence. Knowing that together we can practically eliminate pollutants from the air only increases our sense of agency as individuals to effect the changes we all know must be made. I think God is in all of it. God gives us a vast breadth of different perspectives from which to see God, and the breadth itself is one of them.

With that, I'll say a little about today's Gospel reading. It's a story we know well. But it's odd to hear it now—that is, it's odd to hear about Jesus being made known in the breaking of the bread, on a Sunday when we're not sharing the sacrament of the breaking of the bread. We tend to hear this story and immediately connect it to the Eucharist, but I expect it's both more universal and more particular than that. Maybe the oddness of the timing nudges in those other directions.

Here's the gist of what I see: God makes God-self known through the cosmic Christ, by sharing a loaf of bread. The bread must be what is for every human that which is most simple, most pleasurable, and most vital. In this story we experience the rocking back-and-forth between the macroscopic and microscopic, between the universal and the particular. Through the cosmic Christ, we *are* in communion, with the universe within and beyond our field of vision, with existence within and beyond our experience of time.

Whether looking to the microbiome in our bellies or the farthest reaches of the universe, scientists remain on the verge of discovery. The glory of their discoveries is the glory of God, it is God calling us to care for the creation God entrusted to us.

During his 2018 interview, Apollo 8 astronaut Frank Borman said this about sending astronauts to the moon: "What they should have sent was poets, because I don't think we captured in its entirety the grandeur of what we had seen."[8] So to close this sermon today, I'm going to give the last word to a poet. I'm going to show you a video that was published this week by The Salt Project. The Salt Project website says that "SALT is an Emmy Award winning, not-for-profit production company dedicated to the craft of visual storytelling."[9] The voice you're going to hear is that of the poet Marie Howe, reading a poem she wrote a couple of years ago called "Singularity."[10] It feels especially right now, and that's probably why the video was released last week. So I'm going to give Marie Howe the last word.

[Show "Singularity" poem video, starting at 00:32.]

Notes

[1] Judy Rhodes, in a private email to Keri Aubert, March 11, 2020.
[2] "Reductions in Nitrogen Dioxide Associated with Decreased Fossil Fuel Use Resulting from COVID-19 Mitigation," April 9, 2020, available online at https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/vis/a000000/a004800/a004810/ (accessed April 26, 2020).
[3] Ibid. The visualization I showed was part of the NASA article A direct link to the video is https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/vis/a000000/a004800/a004810/march_yearly_NO2.mp4 (accessed April 26, 2020).
[4] *Earthrise*, directed by Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, 2018, is available on the official film website at https://www.earthrisefilm.com/ (accessed April 26, 2020).
[5] NASA did some great visualizations of how that event would have looked to the Apollo 8 astronauts. See "The Story Behind Apollo 8's Famous Earthrise Photo," available at https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/resources/2234/the-story-behind-apollo-8s-famous-earthrise-photo/ (accessed April 26, 2020).
[6] The full film is available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/earthrise-moon-space-nasa.html (accessed April 26, 2020).
[7] Suzanne Simard in an interview with Shannon Henry Kleiber,"Ecologist Shares How Trees Talk To One Another Using Underground Network: Ecologist Suzanne Simard On How Trees Form Communities," November 7, 2019, Wisconsin Public Radio, available online at https://www.wpr.org/ecologist-shares-how-trees-talk-one-another-using-underground-network (accessed April 26, 2020).
[8] Frank Borman in *Earthrise*, at 1:22.
[9] From the Home page of The Salt Project, available at https://www.saltproject.org/ (accessed April 26, 2020).
[10] https://vimeo.com/411239105?ref=em-share