

Easter
23 March 2008
St. Margaret's Church
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To the Honor and Glory of God

God wills life: John 20

The meaning of the resurrection is this: God wills life. That is the point of this sermon. That is the meaning of this day. That is why we have come to celebrate. God wills life.

That certainly has lots of spiritual, emotional, and psychological implications. Because Jesus Christ rose from the dead, we will rise from the dead. Because Jesus has eternal life, we will have eternal life. The Holy Spirit is actively at work restoring us and healing us. The resurrection means lots of things for our spiritual lives.

An idea this big and a thing this powerful cannot be contained. The resurrection has lots of other meanings and implications beyond our spiritual lives as we think of them. It also has a very basic and practical meaning. God designed and created the universe to bring forth life. The whole of creation, us included, is about the business of making and sustaining life. The resurrection affirms that basic understanding of creation. God wills life.

The earth is God's chosen instrument to bring forth life. The story of creation in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis introduces us to a God who creates the physical universe with the purpose of perpetuating life. Our most fundamental and primary experience of God is our experience of being alive – of being a creature on the earth. Being alive is a spiritual experience in and of itself.

If you recall those creation stories in the early chapters of Genesis, you will remember that human beings were partners with God in the cultivation of life. On the first Sunday of Lent, I preached on Genesis, chapter 2 and I noted that the first description of human activity is in verse 15: "God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." We are basically gardeners, farmers. I said that was a sermon for another time. Well, this is the time.

When we work with the earth (there lots of ways to do that, not just putting our hands in the soil) and our fellow creatures to bring forth life, we are doing what we were created to do, and we are living into the fullness of the resurrection. When we tend to life, when we birth it, nurture it, cultivate it, celebrate it - by just living - we are in God's will. God wills life.

There is a line in our gospel reading that appears like a throwaway line at first glance. No modern biblical commentator I could find addresses it. Ancient Jewish and Christian thinkers, however, saw this image as very significant.

In John 20, Mary Magdalene struggles with the empty tomb. She is deeply distressed that Jesus' body has apparently been stolen. The angels fail to convince her otherwise. She turns around and finds Jesus standing behind her. John tells us in verse 15, "Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'"

Supposing him to be the gardener. There were lots of other possibilities: a spy from the chief priests, a spy from Pilate, a passerby, a grave robber, a mourner like herself, or even someone he had healed. The first appearance of the resurrected Jesus and Mary sees a gardener.

We say that the resurrected Jesus is the first of his kind. We will all be like him some day (*see Romans 6.4&5*). The first glimpse of reconstituted humanity gets mistaken for a gardener. The ancients did not see this as a case of mistaken identity, but rather a promise of our return to that agrarian vision of the kingdom of God. We will once again live with God in the garden.

Jesus responded to Mary by saying her name. When she hears his voice, she gets it – she realizes that it is Jesus the gardener.

Each and every person in this story, and in the stories that will follow in the coming weeks, has to make a decision. Are they going to be part of the story – are they going to be who they were created to be – cultivators of life?

Mary, Peter, and John all come to the tomb on that Easter morning expecting to find death. They do not yet believe in the power of life. Each one of them will have to go through a conversion – a profound spiritual decision in which they decide to be a part of the story of life.

Like everyone in this story, we have a decision to make. Are we going to be part of the story? That is the gift and the challenge of this Easter Day. Will we persist in our fallen state at war with one another and with the earth, or will we live into the fullness of life, working with the earth and our fellow creatures nurturing this gift of life? The resurrection affirms what God began at creation: God wills life. Are we going to be a part of it?

In the Diocese Maryland we are seeking a new bishop, and our election is this coming weekend. A few weeks ago I attended one of the walk about sessions for our bishop candidates. It was an opportunity to ask each candidate questions. I asked almost every one of them the same question: what do you see as the church's ministry to the Earth?

One person began their answer by saying they have gone through two significant conversions in their life. The first was a spiritual one in which they became a Christian. The second one was a conversion in their relationship to the environment. They described their experience as an increased awareness of the earth as the giver of life and the issues of community and justice that go with a proper understanding of that.

It takes nothing less than a conversion to see the gift of life. It takes a profound spiritual awakening to see the earth as God's instrument of life. We have become numb to the ways in which the natural world is essential to life. When we think of the environment it is usually as a problem to be solved or thing to be controlled.

If the earth is God's chosen instrument to bring forth life, then maybe we should study a little more natural history and a little less church history. Perhaps we might learn as much about the resurrection by studying acorns and the life-cycle of trees as by reading scripture. We might learn as much about the gifts of persistence and perseverance by studying desert life as by reading the Desert Fathers. We might learn as much about the incarnation and sacrament by attentively choosing, preparing, and eating our food as we would reading theology.

The creation schools us in life if we would only pay attention. How many trees can we call by name? How many birds can we name by their call? How many types of wildflowers do we know? How many rocks can we identify? For many of us the answer is not many. Tending to the life of our planet is what we were created to do, and we will be truly happy when we do that.

Just so you don't think I am proposing some kind of new, radical idea, you need to know that this is about as orthodox as it gets. Bernard of Clairvaux, that great Cistercian monk of the twelfth century, wrote in a letter to Henri Murdach, "One learns more in the woods than in books. The trees and the rocks will teach you things you will not hear elsewhere (*Letter 101*)."

In addition to looking for the resurrection when we die, maybe we could try to see it now. Resurrection is the gift of life, and life is all around us.

God wills life. Easter calls us to convert, to change our lives and be who we were meant to be - partners with God and the earth in this great project called life.