



Now the green blade rises from the buried grain.... EASTER for the whole creation during the COVID-19 pandemic

A roundtable of reflections from and for the EcoFaith Network NE MN Synod
Holy Week 2020

Introduction

Certain events divide time in two, into a *before* and an *after*. They stop us in our tracks. They shake our foundations. After them, nothing is the same, not even those things that continue. A new reality has occurred. We cannot go back. How do we respond? Who are we now? The coronavirus pandemic is such an event. It has divided time in two. It is shaking our foundations. Nothing is the same. Even when shelter in place restrictions are lifted, all will be changed. We will be changed.

For the disciple community, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, divided time in two. A new reality occurred. It shook the foundation of the disciples. It shook the foundations of the earth. When has our celebration of Easter shaken ours? Could this be the moment that it does? Our foundations as church are shaking. The earth is shaking. For us, this is an Easter like no other.

Could Easter in the COVID-19 pandemic be exactly where Easter needs to be? Shaking our foundations. Stopping us in our tracks. Radically disorienting, radically reorienting us.

The haunting melody of the Easter hymn, *Now the Green Blade Rises*, is ringing in our ears, singing new life from death for earth in its distress. In earth's distress, including the current distress of this pandemic, we sing the promise of renewal: *Love comes again like wheat arising green. Now the green blade rises from the buried grain.* Let's keep our ears open to the melody of Life over death, and our eyes open to green blades rising, even now.

Pastor Kristin Foster
EcoFaith Network Leadership Team NE MN Synod
Co-Chairperson





PART ONE. Themes and reflections

1.

A time dividing event also brings us together. For the rest of our lives, the memory marks us, unites us. In the moment, even if only for a moment, we remember that what unites us is greater than what divides us. It opens our souls to our commonality. We seek community. We hunger for relationship. We are ripe for the community of the Resurrection. Dare we trust that our congregations are ripe to rediscover and reshape community, a resurrected community?

2.

A crisis of these proportions swallows us too. Suddenly, we talk of nothing else. Our attention narrows to the singular and consuming focus of emergency response. Emergencies require this. This is also dangerous. We even find ourselves feeding on the adrenalin rush of emergency. We may lose track of longer running challenges. There are those who want us to lose sight of other crises, and who will be acting in the shadows of this one.

The youth led climate movement has been telling us, along with science, that we are in a climate emergency. Our planetary house is on fire. That we may still be able to reverse this. Will the coronavirus pandemic eclipse the accelerating climate emergency, or will it awaken more people to the emergency we were already in before the pandemic, and will still be in once the pandemic subsides?

Celebrating the Resurrection of the crucified Jesus this year enters and disrupts our focus on pandemic; recalls us to its own *before* and *after*; to a cosmic new reality that is right now, meeting us in emergency but shaping us into God's own new reality.

3.

The Resurrection of the Crucified One was radically disorienting to the followers of Jesus. When we encounter it, the Resurrection is radically disorienting to us too. From that radical disorientation (no one could grasp it, everyone was terrified by it), came radical reorientation. The pandemic is radically disorienting. The Easter Gospel enters this time of radical disorientation. Instead of offering authoritative answers or soothing reassurances, it may even deepen our disorientation as it radically reorients our personal and collective priorities and practices.



4.

The Gospel according to Matthew describes an earthquake at Jesus' crucifixion and another at his Resurrection. The earth quaked, shook, rocked. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are together, literally, earthshaking. Geology and theology converge. Earth itself is a witness to and participant in God's redemption. As time gets redefined by shelter in place, we bear witness with the earth.

5.

The pandemic is puncturing our civilization's pretensions of control over nature and over other humans. Nature is not under our control. In fact, when we objectify the rest of nature to exploit it, we unleash forces over which we have no control. An invisible, microscopic virus is overwhelming our health care system. It is more powerful than any army, more powerful than Wall Street, agribusiness, the fossil fuel industry, all the proud towers of our civilization. The Resurrection of Jesus punctures human pretensions of power and domination. Instead of discrediting and defeating his movement by his crucifixion, God vindicated Jesus and his Way by raising him from the dead. Resurrection opens this way as our way.

6.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate boundary crosser. It crosses the boundary between life and death, between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, strong and weak, sinner and righteous, male and female, nation and nation. COVID-19 crosses all boundaries too. Could it awaken us to the Resurrection reality that we are one, in Christ Jesus, *all* humanity, *all* creation? That our healing and hope come only from this oneness, not from walls?

7.

The Resurrected Jesus terrified the disciples. They and their neighbors already lived in terror of the Roman Legions, of the fate of those who challenged the empire hanging on crosses outside towns. How many of our neighbors, near and far, already, *pre-pandemic*, live in terror of governments, court systems, militaries and paramilitaries, live in terror of violence, and homelessness, and lack of health care, live in fear of lack of safe water, or rain for their crops, or of rising ocean levels? Now, in the pandemic, we are all frightened. The Resurrection scares us in both a similar and a very different way. Similar, because it upsets our sense of predictability. Different, because we discover that God is with us for life, right in the midst of whatever we are facing. God, who is for us, is alive and at work.



8.

The Risen Lord (a la John 20, upper room) comes into rooms locked from the inside. While many people are locked in prisons of various kinds from the outside, we all live behind doors locked from the inside, not only because of very specific fear, but also locked into unexamined mindsets that cannot imagine, for example, an ecological civilization, a society that thrives on Life, on healing the earth and taking care of the most vulnerable. When Jesus appears through those doors with the words “Peace [Wholeness] be with you, he is inviting his disciples to leave our fear-locked mindsets, even while we shelter in place, and enter his ‘house of many rooms’, to risk Resurrection Wholeness, a wholeness that includes the whole creation.

9.

The joy of Easter will be different this year, but it is no less joy. As we find ways to meet together remotely, there is joy. As we call someone on the phone we haven’t been in touch with for a long time, there is joy. As we find ways to donate food to homeless shelters ordered as carry-out from struggling restaurants, there is joy. As we find places to take a quiet walk and notice the earliest signs of spring, there is joy. As we find ways to make music together from separate places, there is joy. As we find ways to celebrate Earth Day, there is joy. It is the joy of discovering green blades rising. It is the joy of our own deep participation in the resurrection, a power of life that is stronger than death.

Pastor Kristin Foster
Cook Minnesota
EcoFaith Network Leadership Team Co-Chair



PART TWO. Images



The Fire Seed, which needs flame in order to open and germinate. The burned out land can then be reborn. Through the fire’s destruction comes a new life. Resurrection as reforestation. The burned hillside of this pandemic, of a creation destabilized by human activity, contains seeds that even now may be germinating under our feet. Like Pastor Mark Ditmanson, Bethlehem Lutheran, Grand Marais, we can plant. We can tend. We can watch.



Monarch butterflies. these fragile and endangered yet indomitable creatures, are a prime symbol of Resurrection and therefore of baptism. Their metamorphosis suggests that the tomb becomes the womb of new life. Their breathtaking annual migration to Mexico calls us to see hope not in the power to dominate but in the power for life, the power to soar. By becoming Monarch waystations, as Tom Uecker of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Duluth, teaches us, churches and our gardens at home become waystations of the Resurrection. Church not inside walls, but outdoors, even in our own yards.



The sun storm. Instead of the sun coming out after the storm is over, the sun shines during the storm. The resurrection of Jesus is a sun storm. It does not wait until there is no more crucifixion, no more suffering and human disfigurements of relationship with one another and earth. It is not life after death, but life in the face of death, light *in* the storm. Even in all the havoc being wreaked by our civilization on earth and its inhabitants, even in a pandemic, sun is shining. Christ is risen.



The coronavirus itself as an image of the power of the invisible, of the overlooked, of the scorned and neglected, including our neglected balance with wilderness and wild things --- of that which the powers of the world regard as of no account. The deadly virus can also be a humbling biological parable of the message of Christ crucified - the foolishness of our wisdom, the weakness of human strength, the bringing to nothing of things that are....(I Corinthians 1:18-25)



FeederWatch. Every winter for twenty-one weeks starting in November, people like Peggy White of Zion Lutheran Church, Grand Rapids, participate in a Cornell University bird counting study, counting every bird that comes to her feeder. About the time that FeederWatch is drawing down, the nesting and egg-laying begins. As most of us are stay in our homes for shelter in place this Easter season, we can learn to ‘look at the birds of the air’ as the risen Lord tells us, (Matthew 6:26)



The Vigil of Easter...worship taking place in the dark, beginning outside gathered around a bonfire, processing behind the single flame of the new Paschal Candle and the chanted repetition of the simple phrase *The Light of Christ. Thanks be to God.* In some situations, that is all that we can say. The Vigil abounds in great narratives of light overcoming darkness, of God setting slaves free from emperors who think they are god, of global disaster like the flood with a rainbow at the end, of a defeated people, as hopeless as dry bones, brought back to life. This Easter, during the pandemic, we are all keeping vigil in the dark. The light of



Burritos. Boxes of burritos from one of Duluth's locally owned restaurants, Burrito Union, purchased through special donations, were delivered in late March to the volunteers and guests of the warming shelter at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church. This initiative germinated from the Duluth network of Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light. They are already buzzing about other local restaurants they can support by purchasing carry-out meals while supporting agencies providing food and shelter. Ask MNIPL regional director, Bret Pence. Green blades are rising during the pandemic in boxes of burritos and neighbors serving neighbors! Both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change demand a community response, people working together toward a common goal and motivated by their compassion for each other.



Green blade rising from buried grain. So much that we planned for, counted on, anticipated this spring has been canceled. Like the Easter hymn, *Now the Green Blade Rises*, Jesus' resurrection is the green blade of new life from the buried grain of his life ended on the cross. The Resurrection is not something we remember from the past or wait for in the future. It meets us now, planted deeply in the life of this earth, and inviting us to see and participate in green blades rising.



Excerpted from Joy, anthology of 100 poems, edited by Christian Wiman

There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times.

Etty Hillesum, Diaries

The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy, which emanates in this world, always, constantly, as a bright sorrow. *Alexander Schnemann, The Journals of Father Alexander Schnemann*



‘In order to come to love’, says Kierkegaard, about his renunciation of Regina Olsen, ‘I had to remove the object.’ That is sublimely to misunderstand God. Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself.

Martin Buber, Between Man and Man



PART THREE. Homiletical Reflections



Easter Sunday texts- Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

Jesus' refusal of the powers of the dominion of death is vindicated: raised from the dead, he opens up the dominion of life, again appropriately signaled by his appearance as "the gardener" to Mary Magdalene. As the reading from Jeremiah anticipates, he will "plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit." With the restoration of Zion, he shall reign from the mountain that is at the center of creation, and the mountain will give thanks, as the creation is released from the imperial structures which oppress God's people and all creatures.

Rev. Dennis Ormseth

Lutherans Restoring Creation, Minneapolis Area Synod EcoFaith Network

How are the imperial structures, the powers of the dominion of death, being exposed in the coronavirus pandemic? How can Jesus' refusal of the dominion of death release us and all creation now?



“But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’” Matthew 28:5-6

It happened on a Boundary Waters canoe trip on Four Town Lake. A severe thunderstorm rolled in. Lightning struck around the camp site. Thunder boomed off the boulders on the shoreline. Rain poured down, seeping through the less than waterproof tent. The girls in



the adjacent tent were screaming at the top of their lungs. The thunder prevented me from hearing them. Lightning struck a nearby tree, sending an electric shock into the tent. It was a moment producing profound fear.

I lay in my soggy sleeping bag unable to sleep. It slowly occurred to me that I was in the Heavenly Father's hands. I was a beloved child of God, redeemed by Jesus' death and resurrection. A sense of peace flooded over me. At that moment I realized it didn't matter what happened to me in the midst of the storm. The risen Lord was with me, now and forevermore.

The Corona virus pandemic has put fear into the hearts of much of the world's population. Infections and deaths are mounting on a daily basis. It is yet to be known how widespread and deadly the course of the disease will be. Social institutions and businesses are shuttered. Social distancing and isolation has prevented many from gathering to support one another.

In the midst of the fear and isolation, we proclaim, "Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed." The Good Friday fears and hopelessness slowly turned into hope and encouragement. I believe the living Lord, Jesus the Christ, is among us still, bringing forth true reality that we are beloved children of God, in the midst of catastrophe or well being. A prayerful approach to the pandemic will bring peace of mind, and encouragement to reach out to one another in ways that will alleviate suffering and fears in others. We are the "communion of saints" as the Apostle's Creed reminds us. We are now and forever embraced by God's love in Christ. Let us live, love, strive, and bear witness in Jesus' loving presence.

Rev. John Hanson
ELCA Pastor, Retired
Member, EcoFaith Network Leadership Team NE MN Synod
Board Member, Lutheran Advocacy Minnesota



Each year I plant tree seedlings from our local lumber mill which they give away. I join with hundreds of Cook County neighbors as we plant thousands of trees, Red and White Pines as well as White Spruce. But the mill never provides Jack Pines. That scraggly tree has always been one of my favorites. So I thought I'd take a lesson from the Lord who crafted the Jack Pines to release their seeds after a forest fire and so become one of the first pioneer trees to green up the renewing forest. I heated up some cones, and planted the seeds. My bright spot is to witness close up one more of God's sacramental wonders that abound and surround us here in the Northeast Synod. It makes me feel closer to the earth we are to "guard and keep." When we start our seeds for the garden, I have my seedlings getting ready for the forest. I feel such deep hope watching God's renewing power knowing we are called to be stewards of this grace. God's work, our hands! Thanks be to God!

Pastor Mark Ditmanson, Bethlehem of Grand Marais, Eco Faith Network Leadership Team



Preaching Easter for the Whole Creation: Matthew 28:1-10

The promise of “I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20) roots the Gospel of Matthew firmly on Earth. Unlike Luke, Matthew does not portray Jesus as ascending up to heaven at the end of the story. Rather, Matthew proclaims the resurrected Jesus as here on Earth, “God with us.” This Earth-bound focus of Matthew can shape our ecological preaching of the Easter gospel during this pandemic and beyond.

Matthew’s empty tomb story underscores the cosmic significance of Jesus’ life and death. Earth itself participates in the drama of his crucifixion and resurrection. The Son of Humanity was lain “in the heart of the earth” for three days and three nights (*en te kardia tes ges*, Matt. 12:40). Now, at his resurrection, comes what Anglican Bishop James Jones calls “a seismic response from the earth’s heart.” Notes Jones, “I have overlooked the fact that in the Passion narrative the earth speaks as powerfully as the curtain... The truth is that the earth did not stay silent as it witnessed the Son of Man’s death and resurrection.”ⁱ The earthquakes at Jesus death and resurrection embody nothing less than the profound participation of the earth in the mission of Jesus

The Roman imperial regime’s political grip is also shaken by resurrection, as symbolized by the terrified Roman guards who are like dead men. Resurrection is a profoundly political event in Matthew, proclaiming that the Roman imperial rule of death did not have the last word.

The angel’s promise to Mary and the other women that Jesus has “gone ahead” (*proagei*) into Galilee offers rich possibilities for Earth-centered preaching. The Greek verb for “going ahead” (*proagei*) conveys the sense of “leading,” the same word Matthew uses to describe the star that would “go ahead” of the magi and lead them to the infant Jesus (Matt 2:9). Jesus used the word before his death in promising his disciples that he would “go ahead” of them to Galilee (Matt 26:32). “Jesus is going ahead—not going away,” notes Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, underscoring the horizontal dimension of the angel’s words.ⁱⁱ The “empty tomb,” she adds, “does not signify absence but presence: it announces the Resurrected One’s presence on the road ahead, in a particular space of struggle and recognition.”

Jesus goes ahead of us to lead us into the world—into a transformative way of life that testifies to the power of resurrection on Earth.

If Matthew’s emphasis (like Mark’s) is on Jesus’ “going ahead” of the disciples in a horizontal sense—rather than going up into heaven—then Matthew is teaching us to look for experiences of resurrection presence not only in Galilee but also in Grand Marais, Grand Rapids, and Grand Forks—on all the roads of our lives on Earth, even the uncharted road ahead in this time of pandemic.. Resurrection means that Jesus opens up a future for us here. The stone has been rolled away. Like the women, we can run to meet that liberating future for Earth—a vision of the kingdom of God “on earth as in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Rev. Dr. Barbara Rossing
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Endnotes, Barb Rossing

ⁱ James Jones, “Jesus: Savior of the Earth,” in *The Green Bible* (HarperCollins, 2008), I-69.

ⁱⁱ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 126.



This homily was written by Pastor Dave Carlson for the EcoFaith Summit a few days before it had to be canceled.

A few years ago, I cut open an avocado and was about to discard the pit in the compost pail. But then I saw it had a little shoot so I decided to plant it in some soil. Weeks went by and it didn’t appear to be doing anything. With company coming, free space was needed on the counter and it was time to let it go. But when I pulled up the pit, I discovered that the one root had fanned out into many roots! I quickly put it back in the soil and kept watering it in a sunny window, and soon there was a stem that sprouted green leaves. That plant, which is about 4 feet tall now, proclaims the truth of Easter – a seed *all but in the trash* that becomes a symbol of new life and fruit-bearing possibilities. Its life as a green blade rising was a holy experiment, an image of the God’s regenerative power sprouting and growing, fanning out sometimes in secret below the surface through processes we know not entirely how, yet emerging upward with a promise that defies gravity and broadens its roots so that one becomes many. Jesus the seed that dies in the earth comes forth from that same earth, as the firstborn of all creation Colossians says. The Word that became flesh in a deep incarnation, taking on the elements and particles we share with all life and the cosmos – animals and plants, rocks and stars – does not return empty to God but comes forth with a deep resurrection and a new hope for all creation rising with him.

Here in this summit, we have seen signs of that new hope: green blades rising, roots fanning out, stems and leaves stretching up and defying gravity, seeds of ideas that might be all but in the trash but on closer inspection have shoots that point to new life, hands of the body of Christ that aren’t afraid to work in the dirt.

It may have been *dirt under Jesus’ fingernails* that led Mary Magdalene to think he was a gardener in John’s account of Easter morning, says ELCA pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, dirt from his own tomb. Stained glass windows never show it, she goes on, but a resurrected body may be in rough shape. In her book *Pastrix*, Nadia herself, with all her tattoos and piercings, identifies with Mary Magdalene and tells how God *scooped her up* and turned her life around in a similar way, using her own edginess to reach out to people on the margins. God’s plan wasn’t to make me spiffy, she says, but to make me and everything *new*. And new, she says, “looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like

reconciliation between people who don't deserve it." New, we might say, looks like creation care teams dreaming God's dream for earth harmony. It looks like carving out



some church lawn for a butterfly habitat or community garden. New is Isaiah's wilderness in bloom, it is singing fresh verses to an old hymn, forming partnerships, hosting respectful conversations, letting young activists lead, and making better choices about how we use God's gifts of food and energy and water. It is in every fresh start, every act of forgiveness, every moment of *letting go* of what we thought we couldn't live without, and realizing instead that the God who scoops us up too is holding us forever. As Nadia puts it, "*God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves* through our violence and lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and addictions. This Easter God, with dirt under his nails, *keeps loving us back to life over and over.*"

Nothing can separate us or all creation from that love. For in the midst of uncertainty, global anxiety, and a deeply scarred earth, God's love has reached into this world even more deeply to touch the very essence of our existence to bring it with him in his rising. As Gregory Nazianzus of the 4th C. church put it, "That which Christ has not assumed he has not *healed*, but that which is united to his Godhead is also *saved*."

Dear friends, you are God's holy experiments, God's field, God's green blades rising, God's beloved demonstration plot. So may God's word not return empty, then, but inspire you to honor your deep connections with earth and all its creatures, and not to discard the gifts and potential in what God shows us each day, but recognize in shoots that sprout and in your watering and tending the soil of your hearts and context, that in the resurrection of Jesus, that gardener with dirt under his nails, the redemption of all God has made has begun. Amen.

Pastor David Carlson 3.28.20
Gloria Dei Lutheran, Duluth
EcoFaith Network Leadership Team NE MN Synod



A Sermon from the 5th Wednesday in Lent

Well here I am once again in our beautiful church that is empty. It's a Wednesday and for over three decades the community of faith in Hackensack has gathered together in the various churches to walk through Lent together on Wednesday evenings and share a meal after. When Pastor Tori and I were planning the theme of this year's Lenten journey, we had no idea that a tiny little virus named COVID-19 would turn our world, our nation, our state and our town upside down. We are under lockdown with orders from the governor, and that is a good thing.

So here I am thinking-- do I speak to you about COVID-19? Or do I this one last time that we are together --lift up the original theme of our Lenten journey, which is "for God so loved the world"? In choosing that theme both Pastor Tori and I were hopeful that we could lift up God's call to humanity to care for God's natural world. COVID -19 or care of the earth, which shall it be?



I am indebted to my daughter Clara, for helping me find the link between this devastating pandemic and God's natural world. On the phone this morning, she shared with me an article from the New York Times, "The Ecology of Disease", Jim Robbins <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/sunday-review/the-ecology-of-disease.html>

The article was originally written in 2012, but updated and reprinted due to the COVID -19 pandemic. The premise of the article is quite clear: "disease, it turns out, is largely an environmental issue. 60% of emerging infectious diseases that are affecting humans so catastrophically are zoonotic: they originate in animals. Particularly in the last 30 to 40 years every emerging catastrophic disease has come about as a result of human over-encroachment into wild lands, deforestation of jungles, massive clearcutting of forests, destruction of marshes and wetlands. AIDS, crossed into humans from chimpanzees in the 1920s, when bushmeat hunters in Africa killed and butchered enormous numbers of the primates. While diseases have always come out of the woods and wildlife to find their way into human populations - for instance the plague and malaria - emerging diseases have quadrupled in the last fifty years, almost entirely because of increasing human encroachment into wildlife habitat. With the deforestation of only 4% of the Amazon, cases of malaria increased by nearly 50%, because mosquitoes, which transmit the disease, thrive in the right mix of sunlight and water in recently deforested areas. Add to that, modern air travel and a robust market in wildlife trafficking, and the potential for a serious outbreak of a deadly disease is enormous.

One of the surest ways to forecasting and preventing pandemics, these ecological experts say, is to begin to understand the importance of keeping nature and ecosystems intact. The best way to prevent the next outbreak in human beings, specialist say, is what they call the One Health Initiative, a worldwide program, Involving more than 600 scientists and other health professionals, this initiative advances the idea that human, animal, and ecological health are inextricably linked, and they need to be studied and managed holistically.

Which, my friends, brings me back to the first commandment given by God to humans. I spoke of it in our first Wednesday together, when we did gather together, and that command is simply, "Keep my Earth and care for her."

The forces of unchecked capitalism, greed, exploitation of resources, the rape of the earth, the polluting of pristine waters-- all of these are caused by us, by we humans. In and of themselves they are horrible. But the consequences, my friends, are much more dire than I believe we have imagined. It is my deepest prayer that during this time, where we are all forced to pause, we might reflect and learn about what we are doing to this blessed planet.

Over a century and a half ago, Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe, spoke words that haunt me to this day: "Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect." Without benefit of science, ecology, or seeing what the future held, Chief Seattle understood the integral interrelation of humanity, all creatures and nature. We might do well to listen to him.



One of my favorite saints of St. Francis-- he was the patron saint of course of God's creatures and nature. One of my favorite movies is called brother son sister moon. And it tells the story of Francis, who was born into wealth and affluence and privilege. And then he went off to war. He was in a febrile state for a very long time and had visions and dreams and messages which he believes came from God. He became an advocate for the poor, the leper the outcast and the lost. But he also became an advocate for God's creatures in God's natural world. One of my favorite songs from that movie begins with singing 'Brother Son and sister Moon...[Pastor Gustafson sings here]

May we hear and see the tune of the earth and her creatures, and may we sing our part in the Symphony of God's creation. And may we repent of all the harm we have done, to God's earth and to God's creatures. And may the Holy Spirit open our eyes, and grant us new visions of life-giving ways to live in this world.

What does you REAP WHAT YOU SOW MEAN? You reap what you sow is a proverb that says future consequences are inevitably shaped by present actions.

What Bible verse says you will reap what you sow?

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Pastor Judy Reitz Gustafson
Hackensack, MN
EcoFaith Network Preaching Roundtable



On the Valley of the Dry Bones at the Vigil of Easter

When I read scripture, I hear voices, the voices of my people at Messiah Lutheran Church in Mountain Iron, the parish I served on the Mesabi Range of northeastern Minnesota for a span of three decades. They are the voices of people who allowed me to know them, to baptize their children and preach at their loved one's funerals. They are the voices of those who do not risk hope offered glibly. They give it a long stare, a *don't you dare make a fool of me*. They are more accustomed to living with *Sisu*, Finnish for stubborn tenacity. They may take no for an answer from life, but they don't intend to take bullshit.

I hear the scripture readers making their way to the lectern. I hear their voices finger the words, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes awe-fully, often both. These are real voices of real people, voices that come through an orchestra of lungs, larynx, tongue, lips, life. You cannot extract the text from the voice that forms the words, and the life that forms the voice. Here. Now. They are voicing the voiceless, sounding out the syllables of a sacred word that works more as vibration than definition.



The vibration stirs the air, enters ears. Something happens.

When I read Ezekiel 37:1-14, I hear Scott's voice when he reads it at the Vigil of Easter at Messiah. It is dark. Scott was the one who most often read Ezekiel, Scott, who sings like drawn honey, who prays like a spelunker. Scott, whose three major back surgeries have not relieved his chronic acute back pain. I hear Scott's voice, refusing false light, taking us to the valley of dry bones, demanding urgency, probing the taut muscle of the prophet's question. *Can these bones live?* Even the candles whisper, 'We don't know'.

Prophesy to the bones, prophesy to the breath, prophesy. Children at the Vigil rattle wooden clappers as the bones come together. Someone breathes directly into the microphone when he says *Prophesy to the breath*. When the people of God rise to Scott's voice in the final verses, knees creak. Papers rustle. Laps unfurl. They know they have been summoned, included, raised from a bone pile. *For what?* They sense it is for something large. They wait for what's next. Scott's voice brought them through, raised them to their feet, and left them standing there. The air keeps vibrating after the words have ended.

Is not this the kind of Easter sermon you want to preach during the COVID-19 pandemic? A sermon whose voice keeps vibrating after the words have ended? A sermon that takes people down to the valley of dry bones? A sermon that faces the haunted question without flinching, *Can these bones live?* A sermon that dares to raise the dead, because nothing less than resurrection will do?

You may have reason to believe that your listeners want a clear and thorough explanation of the Bible texts, not a sound vibration; that they want you tell them that things are not really so bad as that valley of bones. You may assume they want you to dish up an improvement plan or a dose of easy comfort.

If so, you underestimate your people. Actually, they are listening for a voice to speak the truth their bones already know. *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.* Many of our listeners are already haunted in the middle of the night, in the midst of their news feed, alone. They need a voice inviting them to be haunted together. They need someone to come with them to the valley of human and ecological devastations. They need someone willing to be aghast at the ghastly. (I started a list of examples for you. It grew too long, ending with Exxon Mobil's thirty year orchestrated denial of their own climate science, a lie whose cost may be life itself.)

To be haunted, together, is the opposite of despair, the opposite of cynicism, the opposite of resignation or fatalism. There, reduced to sheer silence, we can hear the voice summoning. *Prophesy to those bones. Prophesy to the wind.* Invite the dead to stand together.

We will visit the valley. We will rattle some bones. We will summon the breath of the wind.



When you listen to these ancient texts for the Vigil of Easter, do not read the words first to understand them, to analyze, dissect, explain, interpret, or even apply them. Read them as if you are listening, listening for voices vibrating in the air. Whose are they? Coated with saliva, moist with mystery, the words leave your throat's warm darkness, born into their own sound, sent out to rattle the bones, to let word turn to living flesh, to raise the dead.

Here. Now. Yes, even now.

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