

“Coming to Our Senses”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
Luke 24:13-35

The first time Jesus appeared in the resurrection, according to Luke’s gospel, it wasn’t at the tomb. He didn’t appear to Mary Magdalene. He didn’t appear to Peter. He didn’t appear at the Temple. He didn’t appear to Pilate, at the seat of Roman power.

According to Luke’s gospel, Jesus appeared to two people of seemingly little significance: Cleopas, who was clearly a follower of Jesus but not mentioned among the twelve disciples; and an unnamed person. Some people wonder whether this second person could have been a woman. The appearance of Jesus also comes at a place of little significance; it’s not the seat of power. If we think of the distance between the Empire State Building and our church, instead of Jesus showing up on Broadway or Fifth Avenue, it would be like he showed up on Route 46, right as it’s crossing over Overpeck Creek.

Even though they were possibly insignificant people, likely in an insignificant place, *someone* they believed to be VERY significant– these two described Jesus as “a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people” and one who they had hoped would be “the one to redeem Israel” chose Cleopas and his traveling companion, on their dusty road between here and there, to show up in resurrected form. Even so, they did not recognize him.

We don’t know whether the trauma of seeing Jesus’ death and the events leading up to it dimmed their perception. We don’t know whether Jesus, in his resurrected form, had changed in voice or appearance. What we do know is that this pair spent the day with this stranger, who started teaching on scriptures. And that whole time, all the way till their arrival in Emmaus, they didn’t recognize him. I wonder if they never even bothered to ask his name. He made like he was going to leave when they got to their village destination, but they begged him to stay and have dinner with them. And then, when Jesus broke bread– as if he was the host, not them– they came to their senses. They had been in the presence of the holy all day, all day they had been accompanied by resurrection glory, but they couldn’t see it.

I am convinced that today, we are still constantly being given glimpses of holy glory. We are being revealed miracles of resurrection. But we keep walking, and we cannot see it.

In Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery says “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.” Jesus was a bit more forgiving when his followers on the Emmaus road didn’t recognize him. Sallie McFague, an ecofeminist theologian, described the earth as a metaphor for God’s body. “God is not out there or back there or yet to be, but hidden in the most ordinary things of our ordinary lives.” And so, the

ocean, or even the tiniest worm making its way through your backyard soil can tell us something about who God is. I know that we celebrate Jesus' resurrection at this time of year not because it's historically accurate, but because— at least in the northern hemisphere— this is the time when the earth is telling the story of resurrection, through budding and blooming and buzzing of bees. What has died, can live again.

Being in God's creation can tell us so much of who God is, if we open our senses to that experience.

Many of you have asked about my trip to Utah. It was... staggering. When I had thought about Utah before, I've thought about the Mormons, I have thought about ski slopes. What I didn't realize is how many shades of orange can show up in sandstone— enough shades to make a rainbow in a canyon. My family and I spent the week of spring break exploring the national parks of Utah: hiking canyons, exploring rock arches, wandering through hoodoos— which look like gigantic versions of the dribble sand castles I made as a child on the beach. We rafted on the Colorado River. We even picked up a hitchhiker: just outside of Salt Lake City, we noticed volunteers were filling sandbags and lining them beside the creek, which was rising minute by minute from the snow melting off the mountain peaks; we had parked alongside this creek outside a diner where we ate breakfast; when we got back to our car, we had to trudge through water to get to it. So as we were heading down the mountain, a police officer pulled us over to ask if we could bring one of the sand-bagging volunteers down the mountain, and we were happy to take part in what seemed like a community effort to help neighbors live in harmony with the changing tides of nature.

I learned on our trip that though most of the canyons and cliffs we visited were in the dry Utah desert, most had been formed by water, changing and splitting the earth thousands and millions of years ago. Once holy ground for Native tribes, the land later attracted religious zealots forming a new, American religion, and as I walked through those same peaks and valleys, I couldn't help but think about my relation to God within the vast web of creation. Considering the rocks and the landscape have been slowly changing over millions of years, my significance in the scheme of it all is proportional to a one piece of sand in a vast desert. At least, that's how it should be.

But I know that my imprint on the earth has a greater significance than that, and that's not because I preach renowned sermons that will far outlive me. According to the World Bank, as an American, the average carbon footprint I may use as an individual is about 16 tons. That compares to the global average, per person, carbon footprint of 4 tons. A carbon footprint is measured by the amount of fossil fuels used, through things like using gas for cars, heating and cooling your home, producing the meat we eat, consuming fast fashion, and flying airplanes to beautiful places like Utah.

In other words, although it took millions of years for waters to split the earth into canyons and to carve mighty arches into cliffs, the impact of human life on our earth is changing it within a matter of 10 years what could have taken thousands. I saw the impact of that with the band of

strangers volunteering together on a mountainside to prevent a stream that was quickly becoming a river from washing away the land; in earlier years, the snow melt happened more gradually, trickling from the mountain and awakening the flowers and plants along its way. Now, it comes as a rushing terror, threatening to overtake whatever stands in its path.

Still, we have it relatively easy in the United States; easy enough to stay blinded to the problems. Our trash and recycling get carried away to where we can't see it. Our buildings, for the most part, are sturdy enough to withstand major storms. For the food we can't grow, we can have it shipped to us; same with water. But I tell you in many places in the world, climate change affects *every* aspect of life. Deacon Venge Nyirongo from our church can tell you about this. He recently took a new job with UN Women, to focus on climate change and its impact on women and girls. Ask him about the latest storm in Malawi— Cyclone Freddy— and he can tell you how it killed at least 1000 people in Malawi; it displaced over 180,000; it damaged or destroyed over 50,000 homes; and across the country a whole season of crops was destroyed, just before the harvest. The warming temperatures from climate change have made storms like Freddy wetter, more intense, and more frequent— often with countries, such as Malawi, that have not been the primary contributors to climate change bearing the price of the climate imprint of wealthier countries like the US.

That's not to say that the US is immune to climate change; we do see its impact. Ten years after Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey, we can still see places along the Hudson River that have not recovered. From flooding in Mississippi and Kentucky in the past year, to fires in California that have consumed entire towns, even a wealthy nation like the US cannot shield itself from climate crisis.

This is hard for me to preach about because I have not yet come to my senses about climate change. It may be the thing I preach from the pulpit that I am the most hypocritical about practicing what I preach. I know the drastic statistics, but these have not changed my life as much as they should. I continue to enjoy the comforts of heating and air conditioning, at a temperature optimal for my body but not optimal for the earth. I rely on my car for things I could carpool or walk or take public transit to do. We've cut down on our consumption of red meat as a family, but our dinner plates still have chicken or fish where there could be an extra serving of vegetables or beans.

While I was in Utah, I kept thinking of how there was an unfair distribution of beauty in this country. How can these canyon views, which literally took my breath away, exist morning by morning on one side of the country, while on the other, morning by morning, you wake up to... New Jersey?

But the truth is, once I got back into New Jersey, I saw that the flowers were bursting open, the bees were busy, and the green: I realized how much I had missed, in the desert, seeing green. New Jersey's not so bad.

New Jersey's not so bad in our climate footprint, either. That's partly because our weather is not terribly extreme, so we don't have to heat homes as they do in Minnesota or Alaska. But that's also because our state has made commitments in the form of policy that curb carbon emissions on an industry-wide level.

The truth of the matter is that even though I know that I am good-intentioned about the environment, I don't do as well as I should. Recycling and walking instead of driving is great. But if the future of our planet is left in the hands of individual responsibility, we are screwed. When it comes to care for the environment, I'm with John Calvin— we are in a state of utter depravity. Therefore, instead of relying on individuals to make the best possible choices regarding the earth, we have to make broad commitments at the local, state, national, and international levels if we want to shield the earth— God's creation— from the harm that we are causing. This will cost us in the short run in terms of money and in priorities, but in the long run it could very well save our lives. It's good for each of us to try to do our part. But like the grace that forgives our sins, our earth's redemption isn't up to any one of us alone; it's up to something much bigger than we are— and it doesn't work unless we have faith in it, and invest in it happening.

“We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel,” Cleopas and the unknown traveler told Jesus, without knowing it was Jesus. Maybe they thought their chance for redemption had already passed. But their Redeemer was standing there, right before them. They just had to come to their senses to see him. And they did, in the breaking of bread.

It may be too late to reverse much of the damage we've caused on this earth, God's body. But I don't believe our chance for redemption has passed us by. I see the earth's renewal in its capacity to heal itself— the young dogwood tree on our church front lawn, which had been planted in honor of Phyllis Sharpe, who had started our English Conversation Program, had withered from last summer's blazing, dry heat. We weren't sure it would make it. But now, it is proudly displaying its blooms— a flower I had been taught resembles the four points of the cross, with the mark of the wounds at the tip of each petal, and a crown of thorns in the middle. At a minimum, we must not get in the way of earth's capacity to heal itself, and as an act of love to God's creation, we can do what we can to help tend its wounds.