

Towson Presbyterian Church
April 28, 2019
Earth Sunday and the Second Sunday of Easter
Genesis 1:1-2:3 and John 12:20-26
“The Rhythm of Creation”
Rev. Joel Strom

Let's begin with a question. I'd like you to turn to someone sitting by you and answer this question: *What do you love about the natural world that we are a part of?*

That's a question that we all can answer, whatever our age. We all love something about the natural world around us, whether it's a particular animal, a body of water, a mountain, or a season. And the opening words of the Bible in Genesis - this ancient Hebrew story of how the cosmos and the earth were created - tell us that we are a part of creation. We are one of many parts of this earth that is brimming with life, and Genesis gets it right that we're *at the end* of creation. Humans weren't first and everything came after in this story. Trees, vegetation, plants, animals and fish all came before us, which scientifically, is correct.

This past fall our middle and high school on Sunday nights explored the relationship between science and faith by watching a 4-part video series. The first video made a timeline where they compress all of cosmic history into a calendar year. On January 1st the big bang happens and the present moment - right now - is December 31 at midnight. So on what dates do really important things happen in cosmic history? In early May our Milky Way galaxy forms and in the middle of September our solar system finally comes together. In late September life on earth *finally* comes forth. Flowers and plants don't arrive until December 20; reptiles and amphibians on the 22, dinosaurs on Dec. 29th, and humans *finally* come into the picture on New Year's Eve at 11:52 p.m., with 8 minutes to go, which really blows my mind! And that tells us something about God, right? It tells us that God, first, is incredibly patient. And second, I don't think God was waiting around to Dec. 31 at 11:52 pm to start being God. I think God has been in relationship with all of creation for a very long time.

What cosmic history and Genesis chapter 1 are telling us is we are a part of this web of creation along with plants, trees, fish, animals, stars and planets. We are a part of creation; we are a part of what the natural world has brought forth. And Earth Sunday reminds us of what the first words of the Bible are saying: In the beginning God created vegetation, creeping things, animals and fish...*and* you and me...which means it can be hard to then draw a line between “those who like the natural world” and “those who don't.” I like camping and being in the natural world for a couple days, but I don't *love* to camp. I haven't been camping in years. And I bet you've heard someone say this, that their version of camping is “getting a room at Motel 6.”

It's very easy to then draw a line between those “who are connected to the natural world” and “those who are not.” Some of us *may* like it more than others, that's understandable. But we're all connected to it, because we're all a part of it. All of us are nature; all of us are a part of God's creation that's been evolving for 14 billion years now.

Here's the first point I want to make: if there's something that is true about nature and creation, if there's something true about the natural world that we live in and a part of, then it must also be true about us. And written into the fabric of creation is this cycle of spring, summer, fall, winter, and spring again. That rhythm is within the DNA of the natural world.

Spring looks to have finally sprung...finally...hopefully. And there's a reason why the early church chose spring to celebrate Easter. They didn't choose the summer, fall or winter – those would not have worked – but they instead chose spring, because in spring something has changed within the rhythm of the world. In spring things that had previously died come back to life. It's a season of new life bursting forth all around us. What died in the winter is alive again in the spring.

And Easter is about new life. At Easter we celebrate that Jesus died and is alive again. But at Easter we also celebrate resurrection, and there's a difference between *resurrection* and *resuscitation*. Let me try and explain.

Our Gospel reading today is John chapter 12, and if we were to go back a couple pages to chapter 11 we would find the story of Lazarus. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha, and Lazarus gets sick and he dies. Jesus travels to see him and as he stands outside Lazarus's tomb Jesus weeps. Lazarus has been dead now for four days and Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus walks right out of the tomb, but he wasn't resurrected. Lazarus was *resuscitated*. It was still Lazarus. He looked exactly as he always had.

Resurrection is different. When there's resurrection and new life comes forth, that new life is different and has changed from the previous life. Resurrection is new life that doesn't look exactly like it did before it died.

There's a story in Luke's gospel that takes place after Jesus's resurrection. Two men are walking on the road to Emmaus and they're discussing the events of the previous days in Jerusalem and Jesus's death. In this story Jesus comes and walks beside them, and Luke says that the two men do not recognize Jesus. They're talking about him but don't realize he's literally right next to them. It's not until they stop in a village and find a place to sit and eat that their eyes are opened and they realize who is sitting next to them. Now I don't assume to fully understand what actually happened in Jesus's resurrection and what he looked like on Easter morning - that's a mystery that's far beyond me - but I will say that Jesus was profoundly changed in some way. He was different than *who and what he was* just two days prior. He was not resuscitated, he was resurrected, which means he was changed into something new.

Easter is about Jesus's death and resurrection, but it's also about *the mystery of death and resurrection*. It's this mystery that happens not just in Jesus, but in us as well. The early Christians called this "The Paschal Mystery." ¹Pascha is another word for Easter, and the Paschal Mystery is when we, after undergoing some kind of death, receive new life and a new spirit. And

¹ See "The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality" by Ronald Rolheiser for a deeper explanation of The Paschal Mystery.

that is what Jesus is pointing to in our Gospel reading from John. He uses an example that is found in creation and in the natural world. He says, unless a grain of wheat falls; unless it dies and falls to the earth and is buried, it's just a grain of wheat. It remains the same. But if it dies, he says it will bear much fruit. New life will spring forth.

And that is the pattern and the rhythm of creation. We see it in the seasons and in the world around us. Unless something dies, new life can't come forth. And if we are a part of creation, then that same pattern and rhythm is within each of us, too.

Easter is this annual event that we celebrate and give thanks for, but it's also a symbol. Easter is a symbol of the kind of transformation that can happen in us. Easter is something that we believe in, but it's also something we are invited to allow to happen *in each of us*. But to allow it to happen in us we have to let something die. That's the mystery – it's not just resurrection, its death *and* resurrection. And who wants to let anything die in us? I don't. To let something die in our life means we have to grieve it, and grief is not fun. It's far easier to cling to something than let it go, let it die, and grieve it. To let something die is a painful path.

Let me try and give you an example of what this Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection might look like...

This summer I will turn 44...and I feel old. And when I make a comment like that, I've had a couple of our more "advanced in age" members turn to me and say, "Joel, I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear it for a second. You have no idea!" And they're right. I have no idea, and I'm actually pretty healthy.

The problem for me is that I act like I'm 25 when I go to the gym, and I've begun to pay for it. I'm injured often. I do too much and my body is physically exhausted, and I have moved to a new stage in my life. I'm no longer in my 20s, or my 30s, and what's awaiting me in my 40s is a particular life, and a particular spirit that comes from someone who is embracing where they are on this journey of life. The rhythms are different now in my 40s, and to embrace this life, I need to let go of this desire to still push myself physically like I did in my 20s and 30s. I have to let that die, and I don't want to...which means it needs to be grieved. But a new way of life, a new rhythm of life is waiting for me.

If we can see how this rhythm of death and resurrection works with that example, we can start to look at how it might apply to later life stages when the life transition is so much harder than what I'm dealing with, and in areas of our lives where the death and the grief are much more difficult to embrace. We can look at areas in our life where maybe our dreams and hopes have gone unfulfilled; our dreams for a certain career or way of life that just didn't pan out. Or maybe it's relationships that were not what we hoped they would be or have just changed and are not what they used to be. The mystery of death and resurrection invites us name that death, and grieve it, and then wait and hope for new life to come forward.

For me, my own understanding of God had to go through this rhythm of death and resurrection. Throughout my 20s my faith was very black and white. If there was a question, there was also an answer always waiting for it. How I read the Bible, how I understood prayer, how I understood

the life of faith was very black and white. And that was comfortable. It was *very* comfortable. But eventually that structure of faith started to not work for me anymore. It started to break down and all of this grey area started to seep in. The answers to my questions started to not be able to hold water like they used to, and slowly this new faith, this new understanding of God started to grow within me.

The way in which I previously understood God was dying and something new was slowly growing out of that. But for this new understanding of God to arise, I had to let my previous understanding of God die, and that was really hard. I had to grieve its loss in my life. But part of grieving is also giving thanks for the positive aspects of what has died. My previous faith gave me this foundation that served a purpose at a particular time in my life.

Today is Earth Sunday, and Earth Sunday reminds us that we are creation. We are a part of the natural world. We are a part of the rhythm of creation, which is the rhythm of death and new life. But this is also the second Sunday in the season of Easter, and Easter is a season of new life...and it's a season of hope. And to hope is ultimately to be in a place of *uncertainty*. Hope is not knowing the outcome, or knowing for certain that things will work out just as planned, but hope is believing this is the right thing to do. Hope has movement to it. Hope has action to it.

When we take a seed and plant it in the ground this time of year, we do so hoping that new life will come forth. And may we do the same. Jesus says, do not leave these seeds on a shelf. They're waiting to be let go of, they're waiting to be buried...they're waiting to be grieved. And then we wait. We hope for new life. We wait and we hope for resurrection. For God has a way of bringing new life out of death. That is just what God does.

Thanks be to God.