

## **“Of Loss, Singing, Resurrection, and Love”**

*A sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA*

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I greet you, my fellow saints, with great love and respect.

I'd like to open this beautiful morning with a non-human, local voice, a melancholy wail I heard while getting into my car to come to the Good Friday service two weeks and three days ago. ([Common Loon call](#)) With the loon's wild call in my heart, I was on my way here to worship with you on the saddest day in the Christian calendar. I must admit to you that, on this second Sunday of Easter, and even though I'm what they call a “cradle Episcopalian,” secretly, deep down, my heart is *a/ways* a little heavy with the pain and shock of Good Friday, even *after* the Easter hymns and alleluias. The reason for that is my profound grief over the never-ending succession of Good Friday crucifixions, particularly with respect to the crises in the natural world, and my bewilderment about how to continue trusting God in the midst of so much loss, pain and death. I still miss the great cedars that used to stand, until about 8 years ago, near the intersection of Rhody Drive and Irondale Road. They were cut for no reason I can see, undoubtedly sold for cash....but while they stood they gave me great succor and peace, and I wept bitterly when they were destroyed. Quite honestly, I'm sad and shocked so often, about ongoing loss, about betrayal and sorrow, that I'm suspicious about the facts of Christ's resurrection, and, like the disciple Thomas, I want proof that it actually happened. It would give me great comfort to know that it was real. I also want proof that it can *still* happen, that the great human/Earth story will end in resurrection, and not with the Good Friday experience.

Obviously I'm not alone with my suspicions; in today's gospel the disciples, upon seeing Jesus standing among them after his brutal torture, crucifixion, and death, “were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.” After reassuring them, *by reminding them that he was flesh and bone*, that it was indeed he and not a ghost,

Jesus even asks for something to eat, clearly not a typical ghostly request! It is interesting that Jesus does not advise the disciples to pray or simply to trust him; he implores them *to see and touch his scarred body*.

In John's letter, we are advised to remember “what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.....beloved, we are God's children now.” A child must have the characteristics of its parents: a cow doesn't give birth to a colt, nor does an acorn grow into a rose bush. Like Jesus, we are also recognizable not only because we have God's spirit within, but also because of our hands and feet, our flesh and bones, our visible wounds. Furthermore, all that we know and can know, the fertility of our immense imaginations, all that within us which stretches and strives toward God and toward Creation; all these characteristics that make us truly human are ours by virtue of our birthplace. We are children of Earth, this Earth created by and for God. Our bodies and, I submit to you, our souls, are made from Earth's elements and quite literally from stardust. And if God made it, it is by definition sacred; thus all of creation is so.

When I was a child my family lived in a rural suburb of Atlanta, in a close-knit neighborhood with a lot of children of all ages. My brother Kim is only 21 months younger than I, and we are close friends. Kim was a particularly sensitive and aware child, who had especially close relationships with animals. Unfortunately, there were several children who were bullies. One of these derived pleasure from tearing the wings off living lightning bugs in the summer evenings; even as young as three, Kim would come home sobbing at having witnessed the senseless violence done to the lovely little creatures. I was also appalled, but I was afraid to challenge the bigger bully. It took some years before shame over my silence in the face of brutality toward Kim drove me finally to deep and lasting change. As a result of that relationship, while still a child myself, I realized that I must forevermore live in congruence and in alignment with what I love, and with what I know to be true.

My family went once a year to Jekyll Island, in southeast Georgia. Kim and I would play on the vast Atlantic beaches at low tide, and we collected seashells and sand

dollars; however, we were taught the difference between still-living sand dollars, covered with hair-like villi, and long-dead sand dollars, whose surfaces were gray and perfectly smooth (and who smelled much better!). We prided ourselves on knowing the difference, and sometimes when we saw other people collecting living sand dollars, we'd run up to them and explain, and often offer smooth sand dollars in exchange. Most people were both friendly and surprised, having no idea that they had collected living creatures. Once however, we came upon a woman and her family carrying large, clear plastic bags filled with living sand dollars. When I mentioned to the woman that the sand dollars were still alive, she snarled back, "Yeah? So what?" We turned back, stunned, and Kim began to cry. I had to do something in the face of the woman's response; I felt a powerful urge to protect Kim, and I felt fury at the cynical destruction of hundreds of sand dollars. Casting about for a remedy, I suddenly had an idea: we raced a few yards ahead of the woman and her family and began digging into the sand, retrieving and throwing back into the sea every single sand dollar we could find. We must have thrown back well over a hundred, and eventually, finding none, the woman and her group turned and headed the other direction. The next day our arms were quite sore, but the experience of taking action was exhilarating and healing for us.

One of my teachers, philosopher Thomas Berry, said, in reference to the human impact on ecological systems, "We might summarize our present human situation by the simple statement: that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and still true in the 21<sup>st</sup>), the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth, and now the desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human. From here on, the primary judgment of all human institutions, professions, programs, and activities will be determined by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human/Earth relationship." My life's work is attempting to foster mutually enhancing human/Earth relationships. It is a difficult task because, at the moment, it is a Good Friday experience. It is a work of anguish, pain, impossibility, wrenching to contemplate. Also, there's very little money involved. But here is what I've noticed: I beg God for money, and often the only answer is an eagle circling over my house ([eagle call](#)), or I complain to God that destruction is

rampant, and when is He going to do something about it, and what I hear in response is this: ([song sparrow](#)).

After my environmental presentations people often ask, “What can any one person do about all these huge problems?” And they're right, these problems are too big for any one of us. What I *can* do is, first and foremost, to be true to what I know I love, which means standing up for that which I love, even in the face of ignorance, contempt, derision, violence, or the overwhelming, sheer scope of the task. I know I love sand dollars, and lightning bugs, and my little brother, and my little brother's open heart, and groves of cedar trees, and birds, and frogs, and most of all, I know I love Whoever thought of all this, as well as my fellow humans who also know, and who also risk speaking the truth about that which causes their hearts to sing.

Avid outdoorsman and environmentalist Edward Abbey said, “If there is a heaven, an ideal realm beyond space and time, it must contain the hermit thrush. Otherwise, what good is it?” ([hermit thrush song](#)) It is *this* world, not an imaginary realm, that offers convincing proof of Jesus' resurrection. It is *this* astounding creation, with its millions of modes of being each reflecting the flesh and bones, the hands and feet, the face, heart, voice, mind, spirit, and *love* of our Creator, that convinces me not only that the resurrection happened once, but that it is henceforth *guaranteed*. Thomas Berry says, “The *universe* is the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of divine-human communication.” Indeed it is the risen Lord Himself who commands us to know Him by flesh and bone. With great respect and love, I'll give the last word today to the Swainson's thrush, a visitor to our area who arrives each year in May and stays only about two months, a bird whose song speaks beautifully of resurrection, and indeed of heaven itself ([Swainson's thrush](#)).

Biblical citations:

Acts 3: 12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3: 1-7

Luke 24: 36b-48