



“God’s New Creation”
Scripture – John 20:19-31
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, April 28, 2019

These [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Our God has always been in the business of creating and sustaining life. At the dawn of time, the Spirit swept over primeval waters and a voice rang across the void: “Let there be ...” God said. “Let there be light, and dry land, and trees bearing fruit, and swarms of living creatures. Let there be human beings — made in the divine image — to till the soil and care for God’s garden.” And it was so. Our Creator brought order to the swirling chaos, so that land and water could sustain life.

And in another time, in another garden, when the forces of chaos seemed once more to rule the day, God acted again. This time in a sealed tomb thick with the stench of death. As the sun rose on the first day of the week, God’s new creation dawned when our Living Lord rose victorious from the grave. Yes, God has always been in the business of creating and sustaining life.

Of course, Scripture is full of stories of God defeating forces of chaos and death: the Holy One liberates an enslaved people from bondage in Egypt through the waters of the Sea; the Spirit stirs a valley-full of dry bones to life; God saves Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath from starvation; and Jesus, in God’s name, restores the Gerasene demoniac to community, and raises Lazarus from the dead ... But those are stories for another day.

The point is this: From Genesis to Revelation, this Gospel truth courses through the witness of Scripture like its very lifeblood. Time and again, our sacred story proclaims in no uncertain terms that the One who is the Alpha and the Omega — the beginning and the end — never allows death to have the final say. God’s word calls forth life, and life abundant at that.

Granted, at times, it doesn’t seem this way. News from around the world certainly suggests otherwise. Ten days ago we remembered that Friday when the evidence suggested otherwise. The bleeding brow, the nail-pierced hands, the wounded side of our Lord all pointed to the grim conclusion that, this time, death had prevailed. As Christ’s breathless body hung on the cross, it would have been difficult to convince even the most trusting disciple that God was still at work.

That’s why — in today’s passage from John — we find the disciples sealed in a tomb of their own making. Even though Mary Magdalene has already come to them with the astounding news that she has seen the Lord, the

disciples still huddle behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. *They* have yet to behold the risen Christ. So, for now, death's grip seems so unyielding that it will take a miracle for these followers to believe the good news.

We can relate to the disciples' dismay and disbelief. Because the evidence of today's world still seems to suggest that death's power goes unchecked. We need only turn on the news ... The opioid epidemic ravages communities across the country, leaving America's sons and daughters struggling against wasting addiction, and too many parents grieving precious lives lost. The Jewish community is reeling from, yet another, act of terror and hate. Our sisters and brothers in Sri Lanka bury the bodies of hundreds of people murdered by suicide bombers on Easter Sunday. And across the globe, extreme weather events wreak havoc and sound the alarm to a climate crisis that poses an existential threat to all life on this planet. Yes, the forces of chaos and death rage as powerfully as ever.

With the constant barrage of bad news, it might be tempting to cower behind locked doors like those first disciples. It might be tempting to choose fear over faithfulness and self-preservation over service, to shut out every threat — both real and perceived — and retreat to some peaceful place far from the pain of this world.

But that's not what our creative God had in mind for those first disciples. And it's not what God has in mind for us.

“When it was evening on the first day of the week,” John tells us, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” Then he showed his fearful followers his hands and his side. He showed them the marks of death, which now tell a resurrection story. He showed them that the same God who called forth life at the dawn of time, had been at work in this darkness to call forth life from the tomb. “‘Peace be with you ...’” Christ said. “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’”

And then Jesus — the Son of the Creator — continues the Creator's work by breathing upon his followers. This life-giving act might seem vaguely familiar, because we've seen it before ... Way back at the beginning of our sacred story, when the Sculptor of Creation reached into Eden's clay to form the first human being from the dust of the earth. God breathed into the *adam*, or Adam — the Earth Creature, if we want to translate the Hebrew literally — and infused this being with life. And now, the Risen Lord does the same for his disciples, breathing new life into a room stagnant with fear and grief, and empowering the disciples with the Holy Spirit. “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you,’” Christ says.

With that, Jesus commissions these fearful followers to tell the story — the ageless story of God defeating the powers of death — so that others may experience this gift of new life. Christ draws them into God's creative work as he sends them to proclaim resurrection to all who are in the clutches of death, to all like Thomas who — in this hour — cannot believe that God reigns victorious o'er the grave ... And this good news is not *only* for humankind, but for the whole creation groaning for release from bondage to death.

For when Jesus emerged from the tomb into a garden teeming with life, God's new creation dawned. As theologian Daniel Migliore puts it: “The resurrection of Christ is the sign, the promise, and the beginning of the coming new world of God.”¹ The One whose word animated the cosmos, now offers new life to every elephant and earth worm, humming bird and bumble bee — to every aspect of creation that has been captive to the reign of death. Christ invites his disciples to inhabit this new world, breathing the Holy Spirit upon them so they have the conviction and courage to step into the garden coming into bloom just outside that room where they've entombed themselves. “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you,’” Christ says.

¹ Daniel Migliore (summarizing theologian Jürgen Moltmann), *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 196.

I think the resurrection account gives us a clue of what it looks like to participate in God's new creation. It fascinates me that Mary Magdalene, who is the first person in John's Gospel to encounter the Risen Lord, mistakes Jesus for the gardener. "'Sir,' she says to this supposed groundskeeper, 'tell me where you have laid [the body of my Lord].'" Of course, Jesus then calls her by name and sends her off to tell the good news. But he never corrects Mary's mistake. Perhaps, because her perception of the person standing before her isn't entirely wrong. The Risen Christ *is* a gardener, to the extent that gardeners are in the business of nurturing life.

And now, the Gardener of God's new creation breathes the Holy Spirit upon his disciples and sends them forth to continue his work: to clear away the mulch of decaying leaves and till the soil so that it can support fresh growth, to prune away dying branches that hinder health, and to sow seeds that will yield God's harvest. In short, to be in the business of nurturing and sustaining life.

Christ commissions those first disciples to tend to God's new creation. And — Friends — this is our charge as well. For we, too, have met the Risen Christ; we, too, have received the Holy Spirit. So, now, it's our turn. It's our turn to step into the garden of God's new world, to thrust our hands into its soil and to show the world, through our witness and work, that the One who ordered the swirling chaos is still at work to bring forth new life. And, if we look, we can see God's new creation taking root.

We see it in Guatemala through our Presbytery's partnership with the Association of Mam Christian Women for Development. In an effort to care both for families and for creation, we have worked with the Association to provide water filters, stoves, and latrines so that hundreds of households in rural Guatemala benefit from healthier, safer living conditions *and* lessen their impact on the environment. Not long ago chaos swirled in the form of strong winds and falling trees, which damaged the workshop where our partners manufacture these items. But within a week, they secured a loan, began reconstruction, and got back to work so that they could continue to serve this community and enhance its quality of life.

There it is — God's new creation taking root. The Spirit at work to bring forth life from death.

We see it here in Wilmington, as ministries like Family Promise embrace families who have been thrust into chaos. For these neighbors, the forces of death often come in the form of job loss or a health crisis that throws them into turmoil and leaves them without a place to lay their heads. But, through the generosity of many, including many within this congregation, these families receive hospitality and a helping hand, and — usually in a matter of months — get back on their feet.

There it is — God's new creation taking root. The Spirit at work to bring forth life from death.

We see it in this very building, as our Earth Care Task Force works tirelessly to tend God's garden by advocating for this creation groaning for redemption. They are combatting the chaos introduced by climate change by landscaping with native plants, switching out old lightbulbs for energy efficient LEDs, and leading the charge to install solar panels on the Daughtry House roof (to name a few) so that our congregation can nurture and sustain life.

There it is — God's new creation taking root. The Spirit at work to bring forth life from death.

There are so many ways — large and small — to participate in God's new creation. So let us step out into God's garden. After all, as the Creator sent the Christ, so the Risen Lord sends us to proclaim the good news, until all creation experiences the gift of new life.

Earth Care Prayer 2019 ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos, who from the beginning has been evoking order out of chaos and arousing life out of death, we give thanks for your breathtaking world that dazzles with vast oceans, challenges with immense mountains, and swarms with remarkable creatures. Grant us vision that peers beneath the surface so that we may perceive the vital lessons your creation has to teach us.

As birds serenade with songs of praise and jubilation, may awe and wonder quicken our soul that we may revere the glory and beauty of the earth.

As flowers flaunt their radiant apparel to attract the attention of passersby, may we brandish the elegance of a grateful heart to remind everyone of the precious gifts of mental and physical health.

As roots of trees probe beneath the surface in search of water, may we burrow down into the wisdom of Scripture and tap into the living water that satisfies our deepest thirst.

As rain perks up shriveled plants before they perish, may your love hydrate the barren places of our lives so that hope may be reborn within us.

Loving God, we pray that we may take nothing for granted –
not sunrises or colors,
not breathing or laughter,
not food or friendship,
not affection or kindness.

Remind us, O Lord, that your creation is a gift –
an amazing and beautiful and sacred gift.

May we cherish it, enjoy it, protect it and preserve it, for we are but temporary stewards of your stunning blue planet.

Now, hear us as we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.