

## PUT YOUR FINGER HERE

Texts on Sunday, April 15, 2007

*John 20: 19-31*

*Acts 5: 27-42*

Our frigid April temperatures may temporarily suppress the inclination to think about global warming, but it is really coming, now. Don't you sense it? Just this year, two consortiums of world scientists have made two separate reports to the United Nations, laying out the science for their certainty that this globe is heating up fast, and that human energy consumption is a major cause. Recently, CBS' *60 Minutes* devoted another segment to the saga of climate change. *Time Magazine's* April 9<sup>th</sup> cover article, with a lone penguin perched on a little hill of ice, was called "The Global Warming Survival Guide." Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, won an Academy Award last month. Richard Cizik, the head of the National Association of Evangelicals, has pushed his reluctant co-religionists to accept that vital environmental action is central to Christian love and stewardship. And Denis Hayes, the man who founded Earth Day more than a generation ago spent last Tuesday speaking all over Buffalo. Mr. Hayes reported that, during a U.N. debate on national policies to reduce greenhouse gases, our Mr. Bush voted No for you. When the votes from the commonwealth of nations were in, 1 to 159 was the tally. Yet, in spite of this administration's appalling arrogance, consciousness is rising—though perhaps not faster than the world's thermometer. Nevertheless, awareness is dawning that we have been robbing the store of the earth for a century or more and burning its riches like ignorant fools.

At the invitation of a church member, I went to hear Denis Hayes last Tuesday. We were fortunate to have him here on the cusp of Earth Day, the April 22 anniversary marking this dawning in our consciousness that humans must live with our environment, not off it. Now, this event was taking place just two days after Easter. The shimmer of the holy day was still in the wind—the questions, the awesome hope, the promise of the shattered stone. Looking around at that huge luncheon crowd of four hundred professionals concerned about climate change, I wondered how many had been to an Easter service. Perhaps well more than half? I wondered, how was their Easter resurrection devotion connecting with this question of renewed life for this damned planet? For most, probably not at all.

That is a sad fact for the Christian religion and for all humanity. Part of the problem is the way we church people think about our central story. We suspend it like a specimen in a museum box, the mere miracle box of ancient history. On display there, it may cheer us individually, but it does not relate to anything else going on on earth. Jesus might as well stay stuck on the cross, if the Crucifixion-Resurrection story does not come to life in the midst of the crisis of this gruesomely wounded planet. All humanity is the poorer when the church, sitting in its million boxes, placidly tells its story to itself once or twice a year, but leaves these rooms—these tombs—saying "nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16.8) I hope you will leave this room today convicted in heart and mind that the question of your own personal salvation is simply too small a thing for true God to obsess over. Christ is risen not to pull you alone out of the ditch, but to draw all—and not so that everybody might sing Jesus songs, but so that one world might sit at one table, and see one another at last. What if no one leaves until the whole class is finished—the whole creation? Now that's a body to want to touch.

What can be the Crucifixion-Resurrection word to us who are so utterly out of balance with the world, and so hungry to go on living in the manner to which we have become accustomed? Before

we try an answer, first a word about the battle lines that form around environmental issues. Today, a so-called liberal usually is worried that corporations and rich people should be stopped from doing bad things to the natural and social environments. A so-called conservative in our day is rather more worried that bad people are doing bad things in their private lives. The liberal isn't too worried about that; he and she don't care to be held to account for their so-called private choices in their private lives. And while the conservative has nothing to hide on *this* score—he is an upstanding citizen!—he resists being held to account for the larger social consequences of his choices.

There you have it, America's little tragicomedy: liberals and conservatives actually wasting their energy on their supposed enemies, while in fact both resolutely stand on one principle: me first, don't tread on me, I'm a rugged individual in my chosen environment. These differences are a distraction—a matter of taste! The liberal thinks he is sole owner of his body, to do with as he likes, and the conservative thinks she is sole owner of whatever she has bought, to do with as she likes. Yet all the while, what is operating—what is really heating things up—is Me-ism. We can smell the odor in our own lives. We're happy to change energy uses that save money, but if it will cost money or time . . . how slow are we to consider a change. And as to our private lives, if we are holding on to hopes for happiness from different sources, happinesses that cannot be reconciled (this is the condition for all immoral action), who holds us accountable to clear our vision and pursue only one highest good? No one. We are scattered, alone.

Radical individualism is the root of our evil and the cause of our present alienation from this beautiful garden that we were given. "Rugged individualism," writes Wendell Berry, ". . . has cost us dearly in lost topsoil, in destroyed forests, in the increasing toxicity of the world, and in annihilated species. When property rights become absolute, they are invariably destructive."<sup>1</sup> What is the Crucifixion-Resurrection word in such a world?

Yesterday, rallies to raise consciousness on environmental concerns were held in some 1,300 American communities. Unlike the Denis Hayes luncheon last Tuesday, the small, scattered crowd that gathered by the lake in Delaware Park included no power hitters from business or government. You saw the booths and the pamphlets and the advocates. But you did not see a community. Neither was the luncheon early this week a community. It was an assembly. I do not mean to lodge that fact as criticism of the organizers of these events; they are, after all, doing something; they are trying to organize opposition to this and to that, and to kindle social action. How the organizers in the park yearn for a real body of action.

But Christians claim that they are already organized in a body, which is to say, organized to *do* something—for what good is a body if it doesn't do something? We claim that we are organs in a body as wide as this world. But what is the church organized *for*? To worship God? Yes, but God doesn't need this. To make ourselves bigger, more numerous? I hope that is not our mission; getting bigger for no greater purpose is the growth program of cancer! No, we claim that we are already organs organized to serve as Christ Jesus served, who was perfectly plain that he was to be found wherever the least and the lost are found. Yet the American church is not a body able to hold either liberal or conservative to account for behavior in a complete environment. *For everyone did what was right in his own eyes*, as the last sentence of the book of *Judges* puts it.

Now Thomas, the disciple, was not present with his friends when the risen Lord had come among them. Thomas is us, the rugged individual. He is not with the community they begin to realize who God is, and who they are—their real environment. Holding back from real community, from real accountability, from real service, Thomas, like us, does not learn in a community that the forces of empire are powerless against the life that God gives to God's servant. Nevertheless, he, like

you, like me, like that scattered group who gathered by the lake yesterday, returns to the community after a time. He returns seeking something, seeking his own experience. And the Lord does not disdain to give it to him. "Put your finger here . . . Be not unfaithful, but faithful." Then, at last, Thomas sees: "My Lord and my God."

Now, do not box this old story in glass. Like all the others, it is not so much that it happened once as it is that it is happening eternally now. The body of Christ goes into the world, sometimes passing through walls no other could pass, to have an encounter with the rugged individual, the one who does not believe that all things are connected, who holds always his own counsel, who has no idea what to do about global warming or the empires of power or even his own hurting family. To such a one, the Body of Christ can learn again to say, "Put your finger here!" On the wound in your own family. On the rupture in your city. On the failing farms that surround it. On the beauty of the body of culture and religion and place. Put your finger here. Do not waste time on your disputes with people whose selfishness shows up in a shade darker than yours. There will be no grand political/ technological solution to the great damage wrought upon the body of earth. Denis Hayes says it will take one million years to undo the damage we have wrought in 100 years of oil. "They" didn't do it to us; we all did. "Now drink you all of it." Everything that humans do from now on that really matters for this planet will be local—community-based! Put your finger here.

When our separate, individual, unaccountable self says "My Lord and my God!" because we have touched the real, living body of Christ—because we have seen, as if we had been blind, how we all hang together, meaning everybody, the whole class of humanity of every age and every religion, even none; when we that we are intricately inter-depending, then this new person, this new creation—perhaps it is you—is ready to be an organ in God's body. Not a mere resister, a nay-sayer, not a stop--this-and-stop-that citizen, but a body-builder. Yes, the body is wounded. But put your finger here, in community, and see that the body is also completely, radically whole. Wendell Berry writes:

A coherent community is undoubtedly an excellent purpose . . . But I'm afraid that none of us lives in one [and there is] not one that we can "go back to." We have no place to begin but where we are . . . Where we are is a world dominated by a global economy that places no value whatsoever on community or community coherence. In this economy, you can do nothing more divisive than to assert the claims of community. This puts you immediately at odds with powerful people.<sup>2</sup>

That is your cross-road. Commit to the integrity of the whole of humanity in one community and you will know who is your Lord and your God.

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1. *The Way of Ignorance*, by Wendell Berry (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), p. 9-11

2. p. 78