

**RESURRECTION I: EARTH DAY; ACTS 4: 32-35; “EARTH POEM” LEAVES OF GRASS, 1855 EDITION; APRIL 19, 2009 – SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
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We shift quickly in today’s reading from an empty tomb and shouts of Resurrection to the nuts and bolts of everyday life in the early church.

It has often been said that one of the best proofs of the Risen Christ was the practical, radical changes that took place among his first followers. The question for the early church was not so much “how did resurrection occur” as it was “what will our life look like now that death has been defeated?”

Not only were there repeated, independent reports of the Risen Christ appearing among his followers but there were increasingly reports like we have today of their otherwise unaccountable new behavior.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and *no one claimed private ownership of any possessions*, but everything they owned was held in common....which they laid at the apostles’ feet and distributed to each as any had need.”

The challenge with a story like this which is historically accurate is to suspend our modern prejudices and biases.

This simple record of communal living pre-dates Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, The Great Society, “From Welfare to Workfare” and all of our politically and economically liberal/conservative hot buttons that surround any discussion of private property in our capitalist economy.

I start today with one of the most powerful signs of resurrection in the early church – the disclaiming of private possessions – and suggest that in their example those first Christians gave us both a theological and practical model for Green Discipleship.

Tomorrow is Earth Day. Our Green Committee is celebrating the month of April with a series of service and educational activities.

In this season of Easter I would like to underscore today and next week how central and direct our care of the earth and its resources is not just for our survival as a species but for our life as God’s people.

Let’s start with private property. Much of the Book of Acts is devoted to economic issues within the church. Luke’s Gospel, by the same author, also deals with money: the parables of the Debtors, the Talents, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man to name but a few.

One critic noted that as secularization of society spread in the western world and dependence on God lessened money and possessions assumed a god-like status as a means for personal immortality.

This is the notion that if I have enough money my achievements, my power, my name and family will continue after I am gone. Indeed the first banks were temples and the earliest coins stamped with images of gods during the very time Luke/Acts was written.

But on Easter the power which broke the bonds of death and shattered the divisions of speech at Pentecost released the tight grip of private property eliminating the need to achieve personal immortality through money and possessions.

I am not making a case for socialism, for Marx, or for changing our capitalist ideology. I am making a case for resurrection in the early church and this church and for a radically different way of regarding our stewardship of resources.

As it turns out this matter of communal property became a defining issue for the early church. Immediately following today's reading is the story of a couple who sell a parcel of land but hold back some of the proceeds from Peter. This was the first recorded case of deception in the church and ends with a chilling account of their death when Peter asks them to explain themselves. The writer of Luke/Acts is saying that like the rich fool of the parable or Judas who sold Jesus out for a vast sum of silver the attempt to secure life through material things results not in life but death.

If the church was called to be an alternative community, a signal to the world that Christ had made possible a new way of life unlike anything the world had seen, then to ignore such deceit would be the death of the church.

Interestingly, in this story the word 'church' appears for the first time in the New Testament. So while money and possessions may not seem directly connected to resurrection this second week of Easter in fact the handling of such matters is what established and validated the resurrected church in the ancient world.

A new freedom guided these first followers after Easter. They seemed willing to give of themselves in every way without fear for their safety and security which they found not in possessions but in the power of the Risen Christ and in the fellowship of other believers.

The concern of the early church was not to spread socialism but care for people in need. In the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world people attracted to urban centers were separated from the safety and security of their biological families. So for these people, the church constituted a new family.

Converts gave their possessions to this new family for the well-being of all; and it was to that fellowship that they themselves turned for support in time of need.

But the larger context of this story is that the sharing of possessions was the church's marketing and new member strategy. This new way of living together in the fellowship of a new family shifted the church's focus outward to the neighbor, the stranger, especially those in need.

What does all this have to do with us? Everything, especially in an age of climate change.

While it may take me a while this morning to convince you *and myself* that everything we own ought to be signed over to the church – though it would make an interesting theological discussion; it would not, I trust, take much to convince us that the natural world, the world of creation does not belong to any of us.

Most of us own property. But in the final analysis none of us owns the rivers or mountains or fish or wildlife.

Yet the fact is that the developed nations of the world do hold title to many of these resources and often act as if they were the true owners and not just stewards.

It has often been said that in a world of such abundance there should be no starvation, joblessness, scarcity of potable water or materials for the construction of decent living for all people.

Yet, Luther once said we make an idol of security. We place our security as individuals and nations, he said, above the needs of our neighbor and the common good. Now that the Olympics are over Beijing, for example, has tabled its environmental initiatives in favor of industrial growth.

Nevertheless, strides are being made. Sustainable, green economies and resource management are beginning to catch on. 'Going green' is beginning to be the thing to do, even for the church, if your organization doesn't want to look like a dinosaur.

Governments are supporting these efforts. Just in the past months with the election of a new president the United States appears to want to be a leader.

We are positioned to do so. But relatively speaking we are just getting started and time is of the essence. Melting ice caps and species extinction are common. The reversal of these conditions in some cases is impossible. This awareness inspires us to change but will only go as far as we are willing to go in our homes and churches and schools and municipalities to change life styles and habits from the fossil fuel economies to the sustainable green ones.

But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know this morning. So my question is that since we are relatively enlightened about environmental matters why don't our churches and homes look more green?

How long will it take for us to shift to an email newsletter; ban the use of paper products for dinners and receptions; recycle more waste; bicycle or walk to church or work; or consider, if you want to really think out of the box, solar panels (for which there are grants and loans) to generate power here.

If we suddenly erased our carbon footprint so to speak visitors would look at this church and say "Wow, something different is going on there. Look at their commitment to the earth and all living things."

What holds us back from getting more serious about transforming our living habits, about consuming less of everything? There are different factors for all of us. But I think it gets back to Luther's comment that we make an idol of security. So the example of the early church pooling resources, disclaiming private property has relevance to a nation and world that strives to share and sustain its natural resources.

If Christ could overcome the grave, then surely I can let go of my need to hoard and protect what I have and put more trust in God's care for my life – as Jesus reminded us look at the flowers and birds and how much God cares for them. Won't God provide for our needs if we let Her?

When I share what I have for the larger good, I fulfill God's vision for my life. My life is filled with an abundance that transcends mere material things. It's that simple. More barns to secure more wealth is death.

I am not saying you don't have to work hard and earn what you get in this life. I am saying we are called to use the gift of creation as God's stewards to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless *and* care for ourselves.

A church, especially a resurrected church is in a good position to do this. It can live so that others may live, rather than hoard while others die.

There is a wonderful story about Kurt Vonnegut and his friend Joseph Heller author of the wildly successful novel *Catch 22*. While they were at a party Vonnegut told Heller that their host, a hedge fund manager, made more money in a single day than Heller earned from his novel over its whole history. Heller thought for a moment then said, "Yes, but I have something he will never have...I have enough."

How does a person get to the place of 'having enough?' Trusting in God's love and abundance opens worlds of riches to us that make the wealthiest hedge fund manager look poverty stricken. It has to do with letting go of the worry and fear about having enough because there's never 'enough' to satisfy such worries.

Isn't the gift of creation *enough* – "voluptuous coolbreathed earth!; rich apple-blossomed earth!" as Whitman a simple man with very few personal possessions said or as he reminded us elsewhere (*Leaves of Grass*, 1855):

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of
the stars,
And the pismire [ant] is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and
the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre [work of art] for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of
heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all
machinery,
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any
statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of
infidels,
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the
farmer's girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking
shortcake.

Earth Day is a reminder not only that we have enough, but if we find our ultimate security in the life-giving, death-defeating Maker of heaven and earth we can share what we have and risk giving ourselves away without fear or reservation. Amen.