

Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, and the Resurrection of the Body

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I'm honored to be invited to preach for Earth Week. The model of the LSTC Green Zone's Earth Week is one you can use in congregational worship, as you celebrate the great Easter proclamation that God raised Jesus from the dead as the firstborn of creation.

Last March I attended a national ecology and faith conference. After David Rhoads' presentation on the New Testament and Ecology one of the students raised her hand to ask a very interesting question:

In the same way that Matthew's gospel ends with the great commission to preach to all nations ("Go ye therefore and disciple all nations..."), can you use the longer ending of the gospel of Mark-specifically Jesus' resurrection appearance in Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation...as a sort of parallel "ecological great commission?"

An ecological great commission: It was a fascinating question, and one that had me diving for my Greek New Testament in a hurry. Indeed, this student's suggestion has a strong appeal, since there are not so very many explicitly procreation New Testament passages, which would lend themselves so well to an ecological theology. The word "creation"-*ktisis*-is indeed used in Mark 16:15.

But major textual and theological problems make the authenticity of the longer ending of Mark very dubious. (And if you don't know what they are, see me for a crash course in text criticism.)

David Rhoads handled the student's question beautifully, thanking her for her insight, and then gently talking through some of the problems with this verse: The literary style and theology of the so-called longer ending of Mark don't fit well with the rest of the gospel. Moreover, the *ktisis* of Mark 16:15 probably refers to people rather than to plants or animals, since the rest of the verse goes on to speak about faith. And finally, the longer ending of Mark-while popular with snake handlers and some parishioners-does not appear in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of the gospel. (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus both omit it.)

An ecological great commission: It was a great idea, but you don't need it. You don't need to use a text as problematic as Mark 16:15 as a basis for a New Testament ecological theology. Because you have Jesus' resurrection, the resurrection of the body-God's ultimate "yes" to creation, to the material world in all its physical, touchable materiality. You have the great Easter proclamation that God raised Jesus from the dead as the first-born of all creation. That is profoundly ecological.

All the Easter gospels focus on Jesus' risen body, on his bodily presence and on people's physical experience of him in material things. In Matthew, Jesus lets the disciples grab his feet; in John

there are such physical details as the precise tally of 153 fish, and Mary's recognition of Jesus' voice when he speaks her name.

In today's text from John 20, too, Jesus identifies himself in terms of his body: he breathes on the disciples, proclaiming "peace be with you." He shows them his hands, his side, his body...his scars. And he invites them to touch: "Touch and feel my body, my scars; reach out your finger, put it into my side, see my hands," Jesus says to Thomas.

Jesus' scars: the visible marks of his torture, the signs of his crucifixion. Were his scars still tender, still red? In his risen body Jesus may pass through locked doors, but his body still bears visible scars, marks of the nails, and it is these scars that identify him.

Think of your own scars: perhaps invisible under your hair or clothes, yet still tender even after years of healing. I have a scar right here in my head from a car accident. Think of a child, or a beloved, finding that scar for the first time as they explore your body. They touch it, wanting to know how you got that scar. Our scars inscribe our life history on our bodies, they identify us. Jesus, too, carried scars inscribed on his body, the marks of his death. And he invites us to touch him.

In the Easter season, when we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection, we celebrate his risen body. He comes to us in our bodies, in these earthen vessels of molecules which constitute us.

And Christ comes to the world in its body. Scripture uses the metaphor of "body" for the church as Christ's body. Some theologians (Sallie McFague and others) extend the metaphor further, calling the world God's body. Even if you don't call the world God's own body, the world is certainly a body, a body that God loves-with its beautiful forests, its blue seas, its life-sustaining atmosphere, its wondrous creatures.

The world is a body with scars:

- Clear-cut forests: I fly out to Seattle tomorrow to attend a Lutheran Peace Fellowship board meeting, and I'm almost glad to fly at night, so I don't have to look down over the Cascade Mountains and see those gaping slashes through the beautiful green forests, where acres and acres of old growth trees have been logged, leaving hideous scars.
- The ozone hole: Think of the atmosphere as a membrane of skin surrounding and protecting earth's body, and then think of how painful it would be to have a hole torn in your skin;
- Missing species: unique birds and plants and animals that once flew or ranged over earth, and are now forever extinct, many because of human action.

These are some of the many scars, still so tender, on earth's body. Touch them, feel them.

Easter is a season when Jesus invites us to touch, to see, to feel his scarred body, and also the body of the world, with all its scars. Easter is a season to proclaim God's promise of healing and resurrection for our bodies and for all creation.

Since you middlers get your internship assignments today, I'll take the liberty of telling you about my internship so many years ago (1979-80), and my first foray into environmentalism in the parish. It was the height of the energy crisis, President Jimmy Carter having made his fateful speech. I came to Faith Lutheran Church in Hutchinson, Minnesota as a gung-ho environmentalist, and I learned a lot:

I LEARNED first of all that I don't have most of the answers; but that there are already people in any congregation who are very knowledgeable about ecology, who have been waiting for the church to get going on this issue: the high school science teacher who works with kids on environmental projects, who could be drawn into greater involvement in the congregation through just such an issue; the contractor who uses energy-efficient construction and remodeling techniques, who has been waiting for ethical leadership from the church to bring this issue into the mainstream; and especially older people, avid recyclers, who are as alarmed as you at wastefulness, who remember planting Victory Gardens and canning vegetables. These are your allies in the parish, if you go in with ears to listen.

I LEARNED not to preach at people from the pulpit on environmental politics (although they could certainly figure out my political views), but rather to just start doing things: Go into the church kitchen and start washing a few dishes yourself, if you don't want the women's organization to buy so many disposable styrene cups. Turn down the thermostat in the parsonage to save energy. Use the clothesline instead of the dryer-people will be delighted to see clothes hanging on the line, and it makes a strong conservation statement.

RIDE your bicycle! It's amazing what an impact that will have. Sure, it's mostly symbolic, but as a theologian you know how powerful symbols can be. Cars are America's #1 pollution problem. Plus it's fun to ride your bike. Parishioners thought I was weird at first, but they came to like the fact that I made pastoral calls on my bike. People helped me by giving me maps showing back roads I could take out in the country so I didn't have to ride on the big highways.

One day towards the end of my internship year, in May or June, a rural parishioner who lived on a lake phoned me at church: "Barbara, get on your bike and ride out here. The pelicans are here." I had no idea what he was talking about but I rode out there on my lunch hour. A beautiful, sunny Spring day. As I crested the hill, I saw the lake in front of me covered with hundreds of white birds, white pelicans. They had flown in overnight, on their way migrating somewhere, and they were feeding on Stahl's Lake. As far as the eye could see, pelicans! It was a spectacular, unforgettable sight, and one I still carry with me.

And you know what? They're here, too, those pelicans. Wherever you go on your internship or in your first parish, be it Hutchinson, Peoria, St. Louis or Milwaukee, or Gowrie, Iowa...the pelicans are there too.

Even in Chicago. I love to go jogging along Lake Michigan, right over here at the end of 55th Street. One Sunday morning last year when I was running on the beach, there flew in over my head a Great Blue Heron, huge and beautiful, maybe three or four feet tall, magnificent. It landed on the sand right in front of me and stood there for several minutes. We both stood there. Then it flew off again. Who would have thought it, Great Blue Herons living in Jackson Park, behind the Museum of Science and Industry?

Wherever you go, when you take time to see, you will find pelicans, herons, or creatures just as wonderful; you will find that same unexpected beauty and surprise in creation.

This is the promise of Easter: the promise of a great blue heron in the middle of the city, the promise of hundreds of pelicans on a Minnesota lake in the springtime; the promise of healing and resurrection: healing for our bodies, with all our scars; and healing also for the world's body with its scars. In this season of Easter, we proclaim the ecological good news that God has raised Jesus from the dead, in his body, as the first-born of all creation. Amen.