

Earth Day  
April 22, 2007

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### “Return to Normalcy?”

One of the most effective political campaigns in the twentieth century supported a candidate who, by all accounts, ranks among the worst presidents in the history of the U.S. Warren Harding promised that he would lead a “Return to Normalcy” coming not quite two years after the armistice that ended the Great war’s hostilities, the nation leapt at the notion.

In doing so, Harding tapped into a universal human sentiment. We can usually deal well enough with the highs and lows of life, as long as there’s a “normal” to return to. We can do great things on adrenaline, or too much caffeine, but not for long. Not long after the incredible experiences in Jerusalem where Peter and the other disciples had witnessed the trial, beating and public execution of Jesus followed by Jesus’ shocking resurrection, they found themselves back home on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

“I am going fishing.” Said Peter, and immediately his companions replied, “We will go with you”. It was time for them to get back to what they had been doing in their “normal” lives, before they met this man named Jesus.

Like Peter in John chapter 21 we know the feeling after we have gone through horrendous events. After 911 many said that nothing was the same. But the same people said that we should go to the shopping malls as though nothing had happened. This past week you no doubt heard interviews with people who had lived through the shootings at Virginia Tech and also Columbine. To the person they said that their lives had been changed forever. Nothing would ever be the same.

How do we go on after experiencing some of the worst that can come from life? How can we possibly face the future when life can seem so overwhelming? How can we dare face the harsh realities of life and dare to believe that we can do something that might make a difference? These are questions that are addressed in the gospel of John.

Today’s story is a dramatic demonstration that the people in John’s congregation believed that God had not abandoned them. Now that Jesus had risen from the dead they believed that Jesus was alive and among them and continued to speak with them in new and sometimes mysterious ways, sometimes through prophets and other members of the community.

We see it through the example of Peter and six other disciples. After a long, dark, normal night of fishing, they were ready to hang up their nets to dry. From about a hundred yards off shore they heard someone call to them. Jesus knew they were hungry and asked if they had any fish for a meal. They of course said, “no”. So he told them to cast their net to the other side of the boat and immediately their net was full. Then the mysterious one,

whom the gospel of John calls ‘the beloved disciple’ recognized it was Jesus who had called to them.

Peter became so excited that he put on his land clothes and jumped into the water. In the gospel of John the symbolism is striking. After the long dark night Peter was wading back through the water of his baptism to Jesus. When the other disciples got the boat to shore Peter helped count their catch, 153 fish. In those days scientists believed there were 153 species of fish. Because Jesus told his disciples that they would fish for people that meant that they would now go and care for all of the people of the earth telling them about God’s unconditional love for them shown in Jesus.

But first Jesus fed them, with fish that he had already cooked. It was a sign that Jesus would be with them and all people forever through a table fellowship, a special meal, Holy Communion. And through Jesus’ continued presence they could now also believe that eternal life, abundant life was already beginning here now in this present moment. Because Jesus is with us, even our darkest nights are filled with hope.

From today’s story in looking back people could now believe everything that they had heard before in the gospel. The impossible was now possible because in Jesus people could finally and fully believe that God really does love the world. And believers, the church, could now show this by loving one another and loving the world the way God loves.

When things go terribly wrong it is very easy to give up on God. And if people cannot give up on God it is at least easy to give up on God’s caring about this world or anything that happens in this world. They tend to then choose to believe that God is not still in this world but is in heaven somewhere waiting for true believers.

But the gospel of John makes it very clear that God is not where heaven is. Heaven is where God is and in today’s story we see in Jesus that God is with us in this world. Through the gift of faith we are called to join God in this world right now. God does not want us to just have a faith that only cares about the next life. God wants us in faith to care about the world as much as God cares about this world.

When the gospel of John makes the point that Jesus is “God’s Word become flesh” it means that Jesus was completely human like us. By being so fully human Jesus shows us how we are meant to live as human beings. God creates us to take care of this world the same way we believe that God is caring for this world out of love. We are not to see this world as just a stepping stone to the next life. God wants us to treat this world in such a way that we are trying to make this world last forever. And God wants us to live so faithfully in this life that heaven will not be a shock to us.

Dr. David Rhoads writes that the whole plot of the gospel of John is that God loves the world so much that God acted through Jesus to restore an alienated creation to full relationship with its creator. Can you think of a better theme to have on this Earth Day?

So much of the world's news is so terrible that we just want to go back home and get back to life the way we think it used to be. But we can't. When the world is changed so are we.

For Peter to move on Jesus shows him that he will have to first repent and admit what he has done wrong. He will then have to die, that is, surrender his old ways so that he can be a new person. He will have to take his rightful place in the world and become a disciple of Jesus spreading God's love and good news to the whole world. We are no different. We need to first repent.

We Americans generally speaking see a gulf between ourselves and what we call "nature". From the concrete worlds we build for ourselves we make occasional trips that we call "back to nature" acting as though we are not made of the same stuff of nature. And that sense of detachment helps us think that we can trash this world without trashing ourselves. Again, by coming in the flesh, Jesus shows us that we are not created to live apart from nature. We are nature. As individuals we cannot act as though we are not part of the world and what we do does not affect the rest of the world. As a nation we cannot act as though we are independent of the rest of the world. The whole world is God's and what we do in this world as a nation affects the whole rest of the world. On April 6 there was an important news article on a number of internet sites. "World's Scientists: Global Warming Could Wipe Out 1/4 of All Species". That should have been headline news but it was hardly mentioned in the popular press.

The sin that we need to repent of these days is that we really do not love the world as God loves the world. We need to acknowledge our sinful love of ourselves at the expense of all others. We know that the earth is warming for a variety of reasons and one significant reason is the result of human actions that are causing significant increases of carbon dioxide and methane emissions into God's atmosphere, that thin fragile shield around us and above us that permits and sustains life as we know it.

Almost all of the world's scientists acknowledge the reality of Climate Change and the significant contribution of human actions. They refer to our actions when they talk about "the tipping point." Our actions are tipping the balances of nature enough to set off significant natural events that accelerate and sometimes cause global warming. Those tipping points include: 1. Increased fires in the Amazon Rain Forest and the depletion of the earth's lung capacity; 2. The slowing of the North Atlantic Current by 30%; 3. The doubling of the decline of Greenland's ice Sheet between 1996 and 2005 raising the earth's sea levels; 4. The thinning of the earth's ozone lawyer around the world at about 3% per decade; 5) Increase of rainfall in the Sahara Desert which eliminates desert dust which seeds the Atlantic and its phytoplankton which suppresses hurricane formation and fertilizes the CO<sub>2</sub>-trees of the Amazon. This is Africa's tipping point; 6) The snowy heights of the Tibetan Plateau are an enormous mirror reflecting the sun's rays back into space helping to regulate the climate and they are melting at an alarming rate. 7) Methane, a greenhouse gas 20 times more powerful than CO<sub>2</sub>, will reach a tipping point when a reservoir of frozen methane underlying the ocean floor and the Arctic permafrost warms to a point where they will emit massive burps of methane into the atmosphere (known as the Clathrate Gun Hypothesis which is believed to be the main source for the

Permian-Triassic extinction of living species 250 million years ago.); 8) If ocean waters warm too much they will significantly alter the El Nino affect bringing biblical droughts and floods affecting half the globe.

These and other tipping points are like the juggler's spinning plates which if one goes down, many of the others will follow. In less than 200 years our dependence on and exponential combustion of fossil carbon, has set all of these plates spinning. We cannot go on living in denial of the truth about how God's world works by ignoring it or manipulating scientific facts to support opulent lifestyles or political aspirations.

We can change and we must change fast, even in the absence of perfect knowledge. We know what to do and how to do it. God has given us the gifts to learn how to do more in a timely manner. The only question is, "Do we have the will and motivation to do it?"

The one and only motivation for people of faith comes from God. Our faith is born within us when we realize how much God loves us. Our faith matures when we care about all the rest of the world loving as we are first loved. And our faith matures more when we ask "Why" and join the rest of the world in being part of the solution.

We do not live in the past thinking there is some time we can return to so that we can ignore the world. We people of faith are born with a living hope that comes from the resurrected Jesus meeting us at the worst tipping points of life filling us with love and calling us into God future trusting that there will indeed be a time when all will be well and we will hear "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
Be blessing and honor and glory and might  
Forever and ever!"

And then all living creatures will say "Amen"!