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John 21:9-17 Practice Resurrection

We are in the season of Eastertide, a season lasting seven weeks until Pentecost Sunday on June 5. Last week was the first Sunday of Easter, a Sunday we celebrated the promise of the empty tomb, the resurrection of Jesus. At Pentecost we recognize the birth of the church and our call to discipleship as a community. The season of Eastertide is traditionally a time when we focus on our individual discipleship. We hear stories of how Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection and how he encouraged them to carry on his ministry in the world. At the end of Eastertide we hear the story of Jesus' ascension to heaven. Throughout Eastertide we remember that Jesus' death was not the last chapter and that we, his followers, are now his body here on earth, living out his ministry of care and compassion, of justice and mercy.

Our story ended last week with Mary Magdalene pronouncing, "I have seen the Lord" to the disciples. Later that night, the disciples had gathered in a locked house, afraid of retribution from the religious leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Easter Sunday ends with a commission – we are sent out. A week later Jesus appeared to Thomas, who wasn't with the disciples that first night, showing Thomas the wounds on his hand and side. Thomas recognized him as the Christ. The writer of the Gospel tells us that he shares these stories so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.¹

Our scripture this morning is the last of Jesus' appearances to the disciples in the Gospel of John. While John tells us that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded in the Gospel, we are left with this beautiful story of our command - our call of what it means to follow the resurrected Christ in our lives - to practice resurrection. The disciples had gathered at the Sea of Tiberius (also known as the Sea of Galilee) to fish. After a long night of fishing they caught nothing. Early in the morning, a man appeared on the lakeshore and asked how many fish they had caught. The disciples said they had caught none. And the man told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. When they had done that, they had so many fish that they could not haul in the net. They then recognized the man as Jesus. We pick up the story here in John chapter 21, beginning at verse 9.

...When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹ John 20:19-31

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

“So, friends, every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord. Love the world.”² So says Wendell Berry, poet, novelist, and environmentalist in his poem *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*. Berry continues a bit later with these words included in our words of preparation in the bulletin this morning, “Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit.” Berry, who lives in Port Royal, Kentucky, has maintained a farm for over 40 years and knows what he is talking about. He ends the poem with these words that I think the disciple Peter would appreciate, “Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.” Practice resurrection. In the poem, Berry gives a number of ways to “practice resurrection” when it comes to the land, many particularly fitting as we celebrate Earth Day Sunday.

Before Wendell Berry encouraged us to practice resurrection, Jesus too made that same request to Peter. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” And Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” Two more times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him and two more times Peter said that he did. And two more times Jesus told him what it looks like to love him, what it looks like to live a resurrected life. Jesus told him to tend and feed his sheep.

And as you might guess, Jesus wasn’t just talking to Peter, wasn’t just talking to the disciples on that lakeshore beach. Jesus was talking to all his disciples in every time and place, including those of us right here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos in 2022.

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. This is our call as disciples. Now if we were shepherds, and not the kind in the Christmas nativity pageant, we would understand that this call is an all-encompassing call, from birth to death, making sure the lambs and sheep were safe from predators, had plentiful land teeming with grasses for grazing, had clean drinking water, and air to breathe free of pollutants.

² *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* from *The Country of Marriage*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1973. Also published by Counterpoint Press in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1999; *The Mad Farmer Poems*, 2008; *New Collected Poems*, 2012; online at <https://ag.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

As we recognized the official Earth Day on Friday and Earth Sunday today, our call to be shepherds, care takers, tenders and stewards of the environment is front and center in our attention. As a congregation, we have made this commitment official, becoming a PC(USA) Earth Care congregation. You can see the seal on the bulletin. This designation means that we pledge to integrate environmental practices and thinking into our worship, education, facilities, and outreach. This Sunday and next Sunday our worship services will be oriented around our call to be stewards of the earth. There are two educational opportunities after worship, as I mentioned in the announcements. Next week there will be a neighborhood trail walk, which include picking up trash along the way – all are invited to join our youth on this walk. If it seems brighter in here in the sanctuary than it did last week, it is not your imagination. This week, with the help of a big lift, the bulbs in our overhead track lighting were replaced with LED bulbs. And you will hear Jeff Arbour speak in our Minute for Mission as to where we are with respect to our solar panel project. We as a congregation are taking our commitment to stewarding the earth's resources seriously.

But what about us as individuals? In this season of Eastertide, we are called to practice resurrection as individuals, to deepen our discipleship, to answer Jesus' question – do you love me? How does scripture inform our personal call to tend and feed our earth? From the beginning of scripture people and the land are inextricably linked. The Old Testament scriptures are a story of the land – the land forms the backbone of our faith. God's covenant – God's promise - with Noah after the flood includes the land: “never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth; the covenant with Abraham is more than producing offspring, as God says “And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding.” God likewise promises David: “And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place.” The land is part of the promise God makes with the Hebrew people.

Yes - there is a deep connection between the land and the people we read about in scripture. Until a few years ago, I chalked this up to the agrarian nature of the time and place when the scriptures were written. I didn't really get how people could be connected to the “land.” I started to get it when I did an immersion experience in Appalachia while in seminary. As part of our training for ministry, we were required to spend 18 days immersed in a culture we had little experience with. It was not a mission trip and it was not being a tourist, but rather an opportunity to learn about a context from the people who called it home. The Appalachia immersion trip focused on the land and I found myself drawn to it.

As a child of a suburb that was birthed in the 1960's, as one who spent much more time at the mall than on a farm when I was growing up, and as one who has moved from place to place across the country, I never have had an attachment to any particular land. And while I had lived on both sides of Appalachia, growing up in Maryland and living in Georgia for seminary, I had not spent much time in this part of the country. And I held stereotypes – stereotypes perpetuated by the media- of rural life – a life that was as foreign to me (or so I thought) as life in other parts of the world.

And while I'm not sure that I will ever find my identity intertwined with a specific place, the immersion helped me understand why others do. Before the trip I wondered why the people Appalachia were so rooted to the land. Why not leave for greener pastures, so to speak when the jobs in coal mines dry up. But first in the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, NC and then throughout Kentucky I heard stories about what the land means to people. In Kiuwah, NC, the mother town of Cherokees, we walked the circumference of the sacred mound – a raised area of dirt which demarcated the bounds of the settlement before the Cherokees were forced to migrate to Oklahoma. I thought about the thousands of people who lived everyday lives and came to celebrate rituals on this land.

Through conversations with coal miners and environmental activists, with artists and farmers, with a 90 year-old woman whose father made moonshine, with small country church pastors and a Catholic priest who had been arrested a few times for finding the gospel in some inconvenient places, I began to see how the mountains and hollers were more than just pretty country, more than a place where one worked and raised a family, but that there was a sacred trust between the people and the land – through good times and bad – they were connected. This is land from which Wendell Berry hails, and his poetry speaks to the connectedness of life, the sanctity, the sacredness of the land. It is personal for him. It is personal to people I met in Appalachia and it became personal to me.

I think this is what Jesus was getting at with his disciples. It was time to move from the theoretical to the personal. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples were now Christ's body on earth. Christ's mission was now their mission. It was now their time to tend and feed. The disciples needed to grasp that the empty tomb was not merely an event, not something to simply remember or commemorate. Rather it's something we live and breathe. Resurrection has consequences. It's something we become, something we practice in the living of our daily lives. It is reducing our demand for electricity by changing out the light bulbs. It is taking the extra time to sort our trash and recycling and compost. It is reducing the need for pesticides and weedkillers and extra water by planting native vegetation that thrives in our climate. It is reducing the excess that we buy and throw away. It is continuing to ask questions about best practices and continuing to learn more. We can practice resurrection on a grand scale or on an intimate scale. But practice it, we must. Like Wendell Berry, we can changed what the definition of profit is. We can "Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit....Practice resurrection."

Friends, Jesus left the world in our care. We are his hands and feet; we are his voice. Jesus' asks each of us if we love him. And he tells each one of us, like Peter, what it means to answer "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep", he tells us. Let us live as a people of the resurrection. Join me in prayer.