

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 1, April 7, 2013, dedicated to the memory of Dorothy Ringer, to the Sacred Earth Committee and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Do Not Doubt the Earth and All that is Therein”**

**Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Only one week removed from all five of our senses being blown-away by **belief** with the *Hallelujah Chorus*, the feast of resurrection joy, the smell of beautiful Easter flowers, the sight of butterflies and cross with white linen cloth upon it and the continual spoken proclamations that “Christ is Risen, Indeed,” today, we come face to face with **doubt**.

In the gospel of John’s very next scriptural verses following Mary Magdalene’s wonderful and joyful exclamation that she has discovered and encountered her Risen Teacher in the garden, we meet Thomas doubting that this is true. From fierce faith running from the empty tomb to empty faith fiercely declaring “can’t be true,” we move into this resurrection season we call Easter.

**Belief and doubt live together in this season. I love our faith!**

Because of this passage, Thomas has been crowned “Doubting Thomas.” I propose that rather than call him “Doubting Thomas” we should all take this text, go the mirror, read it aloud and look in the mirror and say, “That guy reminds me of me.” Moreover, we should look at Thomas as an early scientist – the one who needs physical proof of the wild proclamations that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is risen from the dead and as the Risen Savior has visited his disciples.

After all, it is two weeks after Easter when Thomas finally sees Jesus face to face. He has been listening to his cohorts for two weeks go on and on about their encounters with the Risen Jesus when he has not even seen him. Let’s cut this guy a break. Only when he finally places his hands in the holes in Jesus’ side and palms does he believes. He needed to see. Jesus lets him see and touch the holes. Then, the Risen Savior, who loves Thomas, in that moment declares – for all who will follow for all time – ***“Blessed are the ones who do not see and yet believe.”***

As we begin the 50 days of Easter, and our 4/1 Earth Campaign, I have been thinking of St. Thomas (who went on to take Christianity to India and died as one of the most beautiful and blessed of the apostles). I have also been thinking about global warming. I was thinking of St. Thomas College in St. Paul, Minnesota. And I was thinking about the Risen Christ and all the great Dutch Elms of Summit Avenue which no longer exist. And I was thinking about my niece Josie Ahrens, a junior at Macalester College.

Let me explain.

I went to Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, from 1976-1980. Josie is there now. During my four years in school, the grand elm tree canopy that adorned the amazing beautiful boulevard called Summit Avenue was completely devastated by the Dutch elm disease. Hundreds of trees, many 40-75 feet high and having been planted in the 1800s, were cut down along the boulevard. I would walk the boulevard to St. Thomas College to study sometimes. As the years went by, almost all the majestic

elms were gone. I still can recall waking many mornings to the sound of buzz saws cutting through history and Dutch elm trees from early morning until sunset in the fall and spring.

Like Thomas, my niece can't believe the stories I tell of these majestic beauties being cut to the ground one by one. I have no physical proof that the Earth was changing around me in those four years. But, I certainly know it happened. I heard it. I saw it. I tasted the powder of sawdust and put my hands on the piles of wood and touched the huge circular stumps of those once majestic beauties.

It is happening still. Ash trees have now replaced the Dutch elm for fastest dying of God's trees of life. There is no reason to doubt that the earth is in deep, deep trouble. And there is every reason to believe that we are all inter-connected to this pain at some point or another.

Dr. Matthew Sleeth has put together *The Green Bible* - a bible in which all the passages of scripture about the Earth are marked in green. Five years ago, Dr. Sleeth started on his journey of environmental faith and activism because his wife asked him one question, "*What is the biggest problem facing the world?*" After a lot of thought about hunger and wars and violence, this ER doctor answered her, "*The world is dying.*" In the introduction to *The Green Bible*,\_ he goes on to say:

*My answer did not come from abstract sources. Many changes had already taken place in my life and now readily apparent to anyone with eyes to see. The last majestic chestnut trees near my childhood home are now extinct. There are no chestnuts on Chestnut Lane, no elms on Elm Street, no caribou in Caribou, Maine, and no buffalo in Buffalo, NY. Multiple states have had to change their official tree, animal, or flower because of extinction.*

*I grew up in the mid-Atlantic area. . . . the flocks of birds that migrated over our back yard in spring and fall are gone. These changes in the health of the planet are mirrored in humans. There is currently a pandemic of cancers and the most dramatic increases are*

*in young people . . . Similarly, there have been increases in asthmas, autoimmune diseases, autism, and other maladies, which many believe have environmental links.*

**No one can suppose that those trends in nature and in us can continue unchanged and everything will turn out all right.** (J. Matthew Sleeth, “*The Power of Green*,” The Green Bible, Harper One, San Francisco, CA, 2008, pp. 118-119).

To paraphrase the Risen Christ: “Blessed are those who do not see the elms, the chestnuts, the birds, the buffalo, the caribou, the flowers, and state animals, the cancer cells, the autistic ones, the asthmatics, and now the ash trees and yet believe.”

Global warming is more than melting polar ice caps which most of us will never touch or see up close. Global warming connects us to the loss of the elm, the ash and our loved ones as well. We are all inter-connected in the circle of life of Earth.

The scientists and eco-historians of our times can tell us of life that no longer lives here. So many stories speak of extinction and our elders tell us of creatures and plant life they haven’t seen or heard or tasted or touched or felt since their childhood. This Easter season, in the cycle of seasons in our church year is one in which we wrestle with doubt while singing great songs of belief. It is a time to dig down deep and plant new life. It is a time to look at our ways of living upon the earth and respond with hope to what we can do to make a difference.

Today and in the coming weeks, we will receive our offerings to support the planting of trees to replace the dying ash trees on our church property, at our UCC camp Tempel Hills in Belleville, Ohio, to remember the children who were killed in Newtown, Conn. and Chardon, Ohio, and in the hills of Israel and Palestine to plant olive trees – a biblical tree of life symbol in the faith of Jews, Muslims and Christians. We will also hand out trees at the zoo the weekend of Earth Day. We will plant trees – physical evidence that life goes on and that we must support and sustain life on our planet.

Why is this important? To quote a 4<sup>th</sup> century Midrashic teaching – “Even if you are old, you must plant trees. Just as you found trees planted by others, you must plant them for your children and your children’s children.” Or in the words of New Testament theologian NT Wright, **“Jesus is coming – plant a tree!”**

Beyond digging deep and planting new life, we can do more. Just as Lent is seen as a season of giving up or taking on something, letting go and letting God in our lives, I hope you step up in this Easter season with sense of spirituality, zeal, urgency and action. We are being called to take on the Earth in this season – planting, watering and caring for the earth in as many ways as possible. Just as we are called to let the resurrection of Christ sink deeply into our souls, we are called to embrace the earth and all that is herein – with the same passion and conviction. We are called into a circle of unity with God, the earth, and one another. In this season which is only one in the cycle which makes the circle of the whole year, I invite you to approach the table of Christ’s grace and peace with an openness to come alive all over again.

I leave you with this quote from Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala Sioux Nation (1863-1950) now based on the reservation at Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The Oglala Sioux, also known as the Lakota, are a nation of people many of us have come to know personally across the years. Black Elk writes:

*“You have noticed that everything an Indian does (is) in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.*

*Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and*

*so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were.*

*The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children."*

Let us see ourselves in the great circle. In this great Easter season in which doubt and belief, let us join in this circle with all creation. And let us pray for and plant within this great circle that God has given over to us for the purpose of sacred and compassionate care. Amen.

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