

An Episode of Earth
First UMC of Pocatello
Second Sunday of Easter (Earth Day)
April 24, 2022

John 21:1-14

Terry Tempest Williams is a contemporary writer from the American West. I first encountered her work in her memoir, *Refuge*, which tells parallel stories of her mother's battle with cancer and Terry's own battle to protect the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge north of Great Salt Lake. She has family roots in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but over the course of her vocation as an environmental writer and activist, she has found her sources of spirituality elsewhere: in private revelations disclosed by nature, and in the storytelling traditions of indigenous American peoples.

Last fall, I went on my first trip to Salt Lake City while my family was in town visiting, and in a bookshop there I picked up one of Williams's earlier books, *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland*. She wrote it while working at the Utah Museum of Natural History. The book introduces readers to Navajo culture and spirituality as a way of encouraging them to develop their own relationships and rituals with land, wherever they may live, no matter how urban or rural.

At the end of *Pieces of White Shell*, Williams offers this insight:

“We can confront the mysteries of life directly by involving ourselves, patiently and quietly, in the day-to-day dramas of the land. To ask a question and find a story about an episode of earth is to remember who we are.”¹ [repeat]

That rings true to me. Both the natural historian and the Bible-reading Christian know that we have been given our form and our life from the dust of the earth, that we exist in a web of kinship and cause-

¹ Terry Tempest Williams, *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 137.

and-effect relationships with all other living things. There is no more “natural” place for us to turn when we have questions about the perplexities of life than to the earth from which we have arisen and of which we are always, by necessity, a living part.

So, if we take her insight as a point of departure for our reflection on this Gospel passage, what question might we bring to the earth? How about this one: *What is resurrection like?*

What is resurrection like?

What is it like to be so utterly turned around, to have had the bright shining hope of your life extinguished, only to see it lit again in sudden and intermittent appearances? So turned around that you don't know what is true or how to move forward?

What is it like to find yourself - your center - again, when everything feels tossed about in the flux of devastating loss and destabilizing grief?

What is resurrection like?

Well, if you're Peter and these six other disciples - and I'd bet some of you *are* quite like them - it looks like *going fishing*. It looks like seeking your place of refuge out on the water, in the boat, perhaps with your friends who know how to silently work beside you. It looks like bringing your eyes earthward for a night and setting your hands to physical work. It looks like pushing off into the Sea of Tiberias, whose winds and tides and coastlines you know so well. Getting back to familiar habits in familiar places. Going fishing.

Only, you did that, but you caught *nothing*. You fished, but there was no fruitfulness in it. No happiness or satisfaction. The sea was holding you up, buoying you along, but it was not yielding its abundance to you. Your work, though a kind of homecoming, was futile. The net, the sea - they're like your soul: empty. And I suppose there's a strange comfort in this, a kind of earthly empathy. But there's also a deep sadness. The events of Golgotha, the wound, the loss - they really have changed everything. Not even the old places and ways sparkle and please.

But then a stranger, one of your own kind, appears on the shore, on the seam between the world you needed to escape from (but to which you really belong) and your disappointing refuge. He calls to you, affectionately - “Child!” “Children!” - and he offers you an untimely and bizarre, frankly a novice suggestion: “Cast the net on the other side of the boat. Try one more time, just a little differently.” You’re called to trust the word of this stranger. Doesn’t he know that on these waters fish are best caught at night?

What do you have to lose? You take one last chance, and - a miracle! - the net *fills* with fish, fills so fully and heavily that you can’t even haul it into the boat. One hundred and fifty-three fish. Had they been there all along? Had that invitation really come from one who stands on the ground you had found too painful and confusing to navigate any longer? Who is it? If you listen to your heart, or to the friend beside you, there’s only one explanation: “It is the Lord!”

Well, once you know that, you dive off the boat right into the water. You touch your familiar sea in an entirely new way, unsupported by craft and technology and tool, by past assumptions. And you swim toward the stranger on the shore. Like a fish, you are netted irresistibly by the power and promise of that word, by the allure of his presence.

When you clamber out of the sea and the boat is brought in, you are invited to breakfast. After that long night’s vain labor, you are warmed around a fire and fed with bread and fish. With fish? Fish already upon the fire? Yes, while you were coming up empty, this man was successfully casting his line. He knows the terrain - all of it, land and water and in-between.

Yet in his kindness and wisdom, he asks you to go aboard the boat and take some of your own fresh catch, to bring your fish to the fire and cook them for yourself. You get to eat the work of your own hands - the time on the sea was not a waste - but you know that apart from his promise, your hands would still be empty.

That is an episode of earth, experienced and passed down to us by the disciples, which offers a glance at the mystery of resurrection.

When we are knocked over, bruised, dizzy by life, we often return to what is old and familiar to us. We go fishing only to realize that, as the saying goes: “Wherever you go, there you are.” We labor for a while like we used to, but it’s not the same. Though it is in human nature to try, we never really can “go back” after life has been irreversibly changed. The sea may feel familiar, but our work upon it will be frustrated.

Then some strange presence meets us in our fatigued and bewildered search and begins to call us back to the place we ran from. We are desperate, so we listen. And we meet the Lord. We hasten home. We eat a fresh breakfast as a new day dawns. And we don’t return emptyhanded, because there were blessings swimming in that old place after all - we just couldn’t see them on our own.

If, in processing our pain, we drift on autopilot to our old fishing grounds, that part of the journey will be redeemed. The one who is raised from the dead can guide us through our own struggles. He has walked and successfully fished in all terrain. “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:5-6). The net fills, and Jesus invites us to feed on the work of our hands. There will be joy again, and dignity.

All this is very much like a sea that gives no fish on one side of the boat, where fishermen are depending on themselves, but gives more than enough when the net is cast on the other side, when the fishermen listen to the word of their guide.

To ask a question and find a story about an episode of earth is to remember who we are.

Listen to the sea, to the fish. We are a resurrection people.

Earth is always offering itself as a school and a refuge for humankind. It’s salty ocean waters are still in our blood; its rocks compose our bones. When we suffer, we cannot help but return home to the earth for solace and direction. Our broken hearts, bodies, minds, they cast their nets into creation, looking for healing, for that sense of original created goodness. On this Earth Day weekend of 2022, what I personally

fear most about the future - more than I fear war or pandemic or political madness - is that we will lose the Earth in the midst of it all, and with it, our memory of who we are.

We are rushing toward a time when our meaning-making nets will come up empty, and our escapes into the wild will be more and more comfortless. For the Earth is sick, and its creatures are disappearing. We are rapidly diminishing the diversity of species and ecosystems. We are, at root, distorting the felt experience of the world's basic essences - water, mountains, animals, trees. When will water - like the waters of the Sea of Tiberius - cease to speak of resurrection and begin to speak in poisoned and polluted tongues? At what point will the insights that our scriptures and rituals and ancestors gleaned from the world no longer corresponds to any presently accessible experience?

Many of you, I'm sure, can remember some experience of nature from your youth or young adulthood that has already disappeared, or is quickly fading.

Call it whatever you're comfortable calling it - climate change, climate crisis, climate emergency - what so many Christians do not understand is this: what's at stake in protecting Earth is deeper than politics and economics and even the prevention of humanitarian crises. At bottom, we are risking all that we might love about being human, including spiritual experience and expression, which are awakened, refined, and validated by *this our only world*.

We will lose ourselves if we lose the Earth, and every impoverishment and pollution of creation impoverishes and pollutes our faith. If Jesus is the Word-made-flesh, the incarnate God; if the image of God is a human person, with a body and a mind, at one with the Spirit of life; if God's basic desire is to bring the kingdom to *earth* as it is in heaven; if our hope is in a resurrected body; if we cannot conceive of the resurrection without episodes of earth - the great catch of fish, the breaking of bread along the road, the pressing of finger into wound, then we cannot keep God if we give up Earth.

With every deleted or disrupted episode, a memory of ourselves vanishes or grows confused. Empty waters mean empty souls.

But all is not yet lost. A voice - many voices, in fact - speaks to us from the land, asking us to try something different, something contrary to the conditioning of our experiencing, to what we know “works”. It asks us to repent, to flip a 180, and turn to the other side of the boat. We don’t yet know the goodness of the one who speaks, because we haven’t yet obeyed.

Should we listen, how many of our questions would be answered! Who knows how many more shorelines might yet offer us their perspective on the mysteries of faith, might speak to us a resurrecting word?

In the name of God the Creator, God the Word-Made-Flesh, and God the Hovering Spirit. Amen.

From Below

Denise Levertov

I move among the ankles
of forest Elders, tread
their moist rugs of moss,
duff of their soft brown carpets.
Far above, their arms are held

open wide to each other, or waving
what they know, what
perplexities and wisdoms they exchange,
unknown to me as were the thoughts

of grownups when in infancy I wandered
into a roofed clearing amidst
human feet and legs and the massive
carved legs of the table,
the minds of people, the minds of trees
equally remote, my attention then
filled with sensations, my attention now
caught by leaf and bark at eye level
and by thoughts of my own, but sometimes
drawn to upgazing—up and up: to wonder
about what rises so far above me into the light.