

Earth Day, St. John's Linden Hills

Easter II, April 19, 2020

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In the name of God, creator of the Earth, redeemer of her ungrateful inhabitants, and sustainer of her being. The Greeks called her Gaia. We sometimes call her Mother Earth, although our species shouldn't be proud of how we treat her, if she's our mother.

She formed four and a half billion years ago. We can't imagine how it worked, though physicists can. It involves gravity, and shockwaves from exploding stars, and a combination of crashing things and clumping things. She was then what she is now, even if we don't experience her this way: a ball of molten metal and rock.

Gaia's surface cooled enough to form a crust, and enough water and atmosphere evolved to form what we now call the biosphere, the thin layer atop the crust on which eventually plants and later animals could live. Plants knew how to turn carbon dioxide and sunlight into oxygen, and animals came to know how to burrow, and fly, and hunt, and mate. And God knew it all was good.

But really the Earth is still 99% a ball of molten and solid metal and rock. And 1% crust. This fragile crust, full of cracks, slowly shifts around on the red-hot mantle. We remember whenever a volcano or earthquake reveals the unstable truth: Gaia is alive. She just moves a whole lot more slowly than we scampering creatures do. Even oak trees and giant sequoias grow faster than Mother Earth. But speed means nothing to Eternity.

We've been celebrating Earth Day for fifty years. She doesn't even notice. But we're not doing it for her. Is she aware of how we're heating up the biosphere? Does she ever comment to the oceans, *hey Aqua, looks like you're gonna be getting all that ice back! You gonna change currents again?* Because glaciers come and go. Antarctica, still at the South Pole, was once covered in forest. And ocean currents like the Gulf Stream can change, too, and give places like England a climate like Alaska. It's happened over and over in the tiny 1% of the Earth we call home. We are *literally* superficial.

When we celebrate Earth Day, we're doing it for us, not Her. By "Earth," we really mean the part of Earth we interact with. The water, the blue sky, the plants we need and the animals we care about. But she doesn't mind. She's mom. She knows how tiny are the worlds of children.

For me, celebrating Earth Day begins with a realistic look at how tiny we are, and how brief our time on Earth has been. Without zooming out beyond Earth to the Sun and the galaxy and then way out to the Mind of God, from a planetary vantage point, we are dust mites, scurrying around on a mossy wet rock.

I think that's what doubting Thomas realized when he warily put his hand into Jesus' sword-wound. Why isn't it bleeding, he wondered. How deep is it? Why didn't someone stitch it up? I wonder if there are nail-holes, too. And then, he saw Eternity. Divinity. Another dimension we're not normally allowed to see.

Poor Thomas. He gets criticized for not believing the unbelievable. *Resurrection doesn't happen*, he thought. *It might happen at the end of time, but not now, in this evil world where soldiers torture and execute people like our dear Lord.*

Thomas wasn't faithless. He was curious. Practical. Like all the scientists who figured out that the core of Mother Earth is red-hot metal. Like them, his evidence was indirect. But he was totally convinced.

Fifty years ago, some folks decided to pay tribute to Gaia herself, and to resolve to treat her better. We began to clean up some of our rivers. To send less pollution up some of our smokestacks. To drive cars that fouled the air a lot less.

But we also began building bigger houses and filling them with more things. Cutting down more trees to graze more methane-producing cattle. And setting up gigantic farms of servers which guzzle gigahypermegawatts of electricity. The cloud? It's not a mere cloud.

And at least until a month ago, we frequently flew and got rewarded by platinum points and free buffets in the airline club room. And tons of liquid carbon got incinerated in jet engines and became tons of carbon gases.

The Prayer Book refers to *this fragile Earth, our island home*. The planet isn't that fragile. She's 99% rock and molten metal. It's the surface of her crust that's fragile. Her water has been cleaner and dirtier over the last 3.8 billion years. It's the biosphere that is fragile. And we are doing plenty to mess with that thin layer of life we depend on.

Yes, we're insignificant compared to the mass and energy of a whole planet. But tiny things are not insignificant, as the mindless microscopic virus covid-19 is teaching us.

Physical objects like rocks don't have thoughts or feelings, as far as we can tell. Gaia as a planet doesn't care what we do. But Gaia as a metaphor for God, creator of all that lives, and moves, and has existence? We believe she *does* care. God gave us this biosphere as an island bubble to keep us safe and do wonderful things.

We're so gifted, creative, free, and generous. We're made to resemble God, made of everything Gaia offers, and we keep going because of her bounty. And we're curious, too, and want to understand how Earth works and why we are here. But we are not very brave, are we?

Not like Thomas, who bravely investigated the impossible human body standing in front of him. Jesus was dead, but obviously alive. Wounds untreated, but evidently *not a problem*.

If we were to actually put our hands into the wounds of Mother Earth, and accept what we've done to her precious biosphere? Would we fall on our faces like Thomas did and say something like My Lord and My God? My Lady and My Goddess? Would we begin to live differently? Fly less? Sell one of the cars? Move into a smaller place? Stop eating meat and unsustainable foods? Would we find a job we can walk to? Turn the lawn over to prairie grasses? Join a solar co-op or put panels on the roof?

Thomas did not just say wow when he realized he was putting his hand into the side of what would later be called the second person of the blessed Trinity. He didn't just say *My Lord and My God*. Tradition says Thomas travelled to India and told his story over and over again, and to this day millions of Christians there honor him as a saint and do not denigrate his practical skepticism.

We're honoring Earth Day in the hope that at least some of us will be brave like Thomas. That we'll see the wounds our species has inflicted on our Great Mother. And get to work on projects that heal some of those wounds. She is 4-½ billion years old, and she'll be around long after we've gone.

But God gave Her to *us!*

How ungrateful of us to treat her this way.

We should love our mother, right?

How incurious of us not to want to see her wounds.

Shouldn't we do more than mail her a nice Earth Day card?

How timid of us not to get to work.

An illustrated video version of this sermon is available on my YouTube Channel:

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