

Palm Sunday Politics and Planet Earth

David R. Weiss – April 11, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #20 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

In just two days we'll remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of what we now call Holy Week. Often commemorated as a "triumphal entry" followed by the Temple "cleansing," both frames understate the power of Jesus' actions.⁶⁹ By seeing them for the richly provocative actions they were, we might also see them as suggestive for our response to climate change.

Jerusalem. Not just any place on Earth, in Jewish tradition the city—especially the Temple—stand as an *axis mundi* (literally: "Earth axis"), a point where transcendence and immanence touch; where Mystery and mundane meet. Such points are known in every faith tradition. That the events we consider today play out *here* makes them more than history: they're *holy drama*.

Additionally, they're located in time as well as space. Jesus doesn't enter Jerusalem in a vacuum. It's Passover, the Jewish festival of liberation, no doubt "celebrated" with bitter irony under Roman rule. Still, the memory of liberation is so fresh at Passover, that Rome dare not let it be celebrated under anything other than a watchful and well-armed eye. Thus, Pilate (Rome's appointed governor for Jerusalem) would've ALSO made *his* entrance into Jerusalem around the same time Jesus did, though coming from the opposite direction.

And his entry would've been *triumphal* in the most militaristic way: soldiers on foot and on horseback, weapons, drums, banners, and poles bearing a golden eagle—symbol of Jupiter, the god of Rome. His procession and presence during the week was meant to remind Jews that the Passover meal would be the only liberation they could expect to taste anytime soon.

Once we realize Jesus' palm-strewn pathway into the east side of city happens over against Pilate's procession from the west, it becomes evident that Jesus is making a visibly *anti-triumphal* entry. He comes, mounted on a donkey in a deliberately embodied echo of Zechariah 9:9-10. His "kingship" is marked by humility ... and the promise of genuine (that is, *just*) peace. As with his parables on the "kingly activity of God," his Palm Sunday procession makes an intentional critique of Rome and its regal pattern of domination. Though some of his listeners may have wished otherwise, Jesus presents no call for violent revolution, but offers an unmistakable summons to a whole different way of life.

But Jesus wasn't just taking issue with Rome or with Pilate. In 6 CE (during Jesus' youth) Rome made the Jewish Temple authorities responsible for collecting imperial taxes and maintaining the debt records frequently invoked to foreclose on Jewish land. Even prior to this, the Jewish Temple had been twisted to serve those holding religious power and economic wealth, but from 6 CE onward it also became *the religious edge* of Rome's political-economic oppression. Even if they did somewhat begrudgingly, the Temple elites were chaplain to Empire. (How deeply the Jewish public resented this is shown at the start of the Jewish Revolt, when besides driving out the Roman army, they immediately burned the records of land debt kept at the Temple.)

So when Jesus clears the Temple on Monday, he isn't just temporarily displacing money-changers and animal vendors. Something *much more decisive* is playing out. He's pronouncing a *judgment* against the Temple for having allied itself with the forces that are stealing both land and life from God's people. As much as the Temple was seen as the very throne of God, a whole string of Hebrew prophets spoke out in the harshest words possible whenever they saw Temple rituals carried out in the absence of justice in Jewish society. They knew God wanted *nothing* to do with worship cut off from justice.

⁶⁹ The texts are Mk 11:1-22 || Mt 21:1-21 || 19:28-48. For a full treatment, see Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperOne, 2006, pp. 1-53.

Some 700 years before Jesus, Jeremiah accused the people of presuming the Temple somehow guaranteed their security despite rampant social injustice, saying “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer. 6:14 || 8:11) Thus, when Jesus invokes Jeremiah’s words about “a den of robbers,” (which, his original hearers knew, culminated in the threat that God would *destroy* the Temple), there can be no doubt in the mind of anyone present: *this is no mere “cleansing.”* It’s a prophetic action that symbolically *destroys* the Temple. Not the building itself, but the systemically twisted relations it had come to divinely authorize. If you’ve heard Black Lives Matter protesters shout “Shut It Down!” as they move on to an interstate highway, you’ve heard *the same tone of protest* that Jesus used to shut down the Temple that day.

It’s hard to overstate the provocative depth of Jesus’ action at the Temple. No doubt, even some of his own followers were uneasy. It was a symbolic act that reached DEEP into primal emotions, not unlike burning an American flag. Or, to “bring it home,” like pulling the vestments off your local church altar *and burning them* if your church has been silent (or, worse, complicit) in any of Rome’s more recent deeds: caging immigrants, bashing queers, killing black bodies, or belching CO2. Most of us would hesitate to go there. *Jesus does not.*

Let’s be clear. Palm Sunday was no innocent pageant of Jewish peasants lining the road with palm branches as Jesus rode through on a donkey. There was, I’m sure, genuine joy in the air. But every cheer of “Hosanna,” every cry of “King,” every salute to “Son of David”—*these were all dangerous words.* No wonder some of the Jewish leaders tried to get Jesus to quiet the crowds. But recall his reply: “I tell you, if these people were silent the rocks and stones would cry out.” (Lk 19:39-40) *Earth itself longs for a rule other than Rome’s.* And that scene in the Temple? It isn’t a judgment of *someone else’s* religion. Jesus is calling out *our* religious tradition anytime it offers even silent complicity to rulers or systems that plunder land, impoverish people, imperil ecosystems, or promises “Peace, Peace,” while catastrophic climate change comes at us. And there’s plenty of both of those going on in churches today.

These two events at the start of Holy Week remind us there are *real choices* in front us, too. And they don’t show up out of nowhere. From Jesus’ first announcement that God’s kin-dom had come near, his ministry consistently posed a stark alternative to the politics of Rome and the Temple. One grounded in compassion toward and reverence for all life. That alternative asks for our allegiance still today.

Palm Sunday’s politics long to be good news for planet Earth. But it will take more than a few half-hearted Hosannas while we wave our palm fronds to convince the rest of creation we’re ready to show up ... for all of us. So if you find yourself feeling a bit foolish, limply waving a palm frond in church just a day before our President’s “triumphal” visit to Minnesota, remember, for Jesus, Palm Sunday was neither triumphant nor tame. It was confessional and confrontational: the communal enactment of pledging loyalty to God and, on that account, *withholding it from Caesar.*

For Jews, eating the Passover makes that experience *present* to them *right now.* For New Zealanders grieving the mosque shooting last March, the Maori haka dance *joined* the mourners (across their diverse cultures) to New Zealand’s deepest past. Our Palm Sunday worship ought to have the seriousness of a Jewish Seder and the resolve of a haka dance. Dare we? The rocks and stones will be waiting.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

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Maundy Thursday – Meeting the End with Love

David R. Weiss – April 16, 2019

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John 13:34-35 – “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are followers of the Way: because you love one another.⁷⁰ Part of Jesus’ long farewell discourse in John’s gospel, these words have given us the name for Thursday in Holy Week: Maundy. The Latin behind “commandment” in this verse (echoed again in 15:12-17) is *mandatum* (from which comes our word, mandate. This is “*Mandatum* Thursday”: “Commandment Thursday.” It might better be called Love Thursday, since Jesus calls his friends⁷¹ to love many times more than he uses the word “commandment.”

Overall John’s gospel is noteworthy on several counts. Considered by scholars to be the last of the biblical gospels authored, his telling is often regarded as the least historical and most theological (which is not to say that he ignores history, that the other gospels ignore theology, or that the others present history the way we think of it today). But, even a surface reading of John reveals no parables, multiple lengthy discourses, and a self-focused Jesus (as opposed to a focus on God’s kin-dom), all of which place him in stark contrast to the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so-called “synoptic” because they view Jesus through the same lens).

One might make the case that John is thus less interested in historical fact, but he remains supremely interested in Truth. John’s gospel—which, like the other gospels aims to communicate good news to his original readers/hearers in a way that fosters *the experience of good news in the hearing itself*—is finely crafted and reflects both the lived experience of his community and John’s own nuanced theology. Of particular note is John’s commitment to “realized eschatology,” a fancy theological mouthful for saying that John believes that the redemptive/liberatory impact of Jesus on us and our lives begins right now—in *all its fullness*. Whether John regards another layer of fulfillment in an afterlife is not the point. He believes that the full power of the gospel is unleashed in the world through the Spirit moving in our lives today.

Two features of John’s Maundy Thursday narrative stand out to me. First, contrary to the Synoptics (and likely contrary to history), John does not have Jesus eat the Passover meal on Thursday night. He pushes Passover back by day: a small bit of “historical license” with theologically seismic implications. Not much is changed about Thursday evening, but the *absence* of a Thursday Passover means that on Friday afternoon throughout Jerusalem Passover lambs are being slaughtered in preparation for the meal ... a slaughter that aligns with Jesus’ death on the cross. It is John’s way of profoundly linking Jesus to the Passover lamb (whose blood, in the original Passover tale kept Jewish homes safe during the final plague in Egypt).

It’s a symbolic connection that (in my mind) has disastrous echoes in atonement theology for millennia to come: in assertions that say our forgiveness/redemptive hinges on the spilling of Jesus’ blood. Given the scandal of Jesus’ death on the cross—which surely rocked his friends’ and followers’ worlds in way we cannot imagine—John’s daring interpretation of the death is understandable. His logic, I suspect, is quite different from ours. We often *begin* the story of Jesus with the assumption he *came* to die and skip over the very messy theology that undergirds that assumption. The earliest communities of believers began with the *inexplicable fact* that he DID die—for which they were utterly unprepared—and then find themselves making daring efforts (that are hardly consistent across the gospels or the early church!) to reconcile the profound goodness of Jesus’ life to the irreconcilable(!) character of his death.

⁷⁰ This is mostly NRSV translation, but I have replaced “my disciples,” which is certainly what the Greek says, with “followers of the Way,” which is what the church came to understand and which resonates with my sense that Jesus never saw himself as having a monopoly on “the Way.”

⁷¹ There’s a whole theology behind this one word, which links Jesus directly to the Hebrew notion of God’s Wisdom. Jesus says his ministry will be (*can only be?*) carried on, not by followers or disciples, but by *friends*.

It's possible—in light of John's realized eschatology (where redemption happens NOW, among the living)—that he identifies Jesus with the Passover lamb not to make his blood key to redemption, but to *include his bloody death in the redemptive power of his life*. As though by finding a place for Jesus' death within the Passover story of God's liberating work, John insures that the cross cannot become a cause to doubt the power of Jesus' life. Like the Passover lamb, his death is one piece of a much larger tale of liberation.

The other intriguing feature of John's Maundy Thursday account is this. We commemorate Maundy Thursday as the night when Jesus instituted Holy Communion at the end of his last supper and before his arrest and crucifixion. But, although Thursday in Holy Week gets its name from John's gospel, in his telling Jesus *never celebrates Holy Communion*. He has a final meal followed by a famous foot-washing scene, but there is no lifting up and breaking bread, no pouring and sharing wine. How can it be that this meal—so emblematic of our faith ... *so sacramental* ... is simply missing in John?

No one knows for sure, but I'm persuaded by a suggestion I heard decades ago (alas, uncredited because my memory recalls the insight but not the origin): in John's community they gathered to read aloud pieces of this gospel each week. And each week they did this *while celebrating communion, themselves taking and breaking bread, pouring and sharing wine*. John wrote for their lived experience, so he wrote a gospel to *compliment* the meal already at the heart of their gathering. No need to describe the meal itself.

Whether that's the real reason or not will likely never be known. But it fits with how I see *this* night in *this* week intersecting with our experience of climate change. Put yourself, even if just momentarily, in Jesus' sandals. He sees the end—*his end*—rapidly approaching. It's not that he wants to die, but that he *will not* compromise the power of compassion that dwells in him. And he sees the rising powers of the world determined to preserve themselves at the cost of his life. This isn't divine foreknowledge. It's simply the sober commonsense insight accessible to most every person who's been a prophet/martyr.

But Jesus' primary concern on *this* night in *this* week is to ensure that the compassion birthed in and through him continues to be realized in the world after his death (that's realized eschatology). And how does he do that? He tells his friends to love one another. Relentlessly. Fiercely. Even at great risk. *Love*. Jesus' death would seem to undermine the usefulness of this counsel. But before we race ahead to the resurrection and see there some miraculous overturning of death, before we do that—just wait. Because on that first Maundy Thursday there is as yet *no resurrection*. No gospels have been written. No Sunday School lessons learned. No Hallelujahs hurled heavenward. No Easter lilies bought. None of that is “real” yet. There is *ONLY* a daunting, messy, chaotic end racing toward Jesus. And he meets that end by sharing a meal and asking his friends to persist in loving one another.

Perhaps that love is central to what happens on Easter morning. (I happen to think it is, though in a very unorthodox way.) *But I want to hold us in the shattering uncertainty of Maundy Thursday for a moment*. There is a strand of eco-awareness today that looks at the unnerving science and the damning math and assesses it with the same sort of sobering certainty that Jesus did on Maundy Thursday: *we're screwed*. And who knows whether it is alarmist (as we like to hope) or just ... inconveniently honest. But I ask you, today, to put yourself in an ecological Maundy Thursday moment. *What if* there's *ONLY* a daunting, messy, chaotic end racing toward us? If so, how will we meet that end? Here is the thin, profound, powerful good news of Jesus: Let's meet it gathered with friends, sharing a meal, and pledging love.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Easter – Resurrection AS Extinction Rebellion

David R. Weiss – April 22, 2019

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Nobody saw it coming, not even his own followers.

Both the elites within the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman authorities knew that the man—and the message he so recklessly embodied in the community he gathered around himself—had to be stopped. This notion of divinely sanctioned compassion threatened to undo the carefully guarded structures—religious, cultural, and imperial—that helped ensure that profit, power, and status moved in ... predictable ... patterns. Reserved to those with the right families, the right connections, and (occasionally) the right opportunities. After all, social stratification is a hallmark feature of civilization.⁷²

But this man's other-worldly vision, his relentless conviction that you could actually weave community out of compassion seemed to have just the right mix of intriguing presentation and beguiling practice. The common folk (upon whose lower, outcast status rested the leisure of others) were enthralled. Not all of them to be sure. Both religion and empire have ways to rein in the aspirations of those usefully deemed "other." *But this man was something else.* And for the sake of everyone who was someone, he needed to be stopped. Hard. And publicly. Because that was the most effective method to dispose of both the man and the message. Thus, the point of the crucifixion was not simply to crucify Jesus but to crucify compassion.

On Holy Saturday it certainly appeared that compassion was extinct, so to speak. By all accounts Jesus' followers and friends were fearful: scattered, in hiding, bereft. How long that first Holy Saturday endured we cannot know. The narrative, of course, says three days, but I suspect that's our own wishful literalism treating the awe-filled testimony of the gospels as though they're news stories rather than *true* stories.

The "fact" of the resurrection is beyond this essay. It's interesting though that Paul (the earliest author in the new Testament, writing perhaps 15-20 years after the crucifixion) speaks primarily of a *vision* of a post-crucifixion Jesus. Mark (the next to write, perhaps 35-40 years post-cross) speaks of an empty tomb but *not* a risen Jesus. Matthew, Luke and John all have "proper" resurrection tales, but it's taken 50-plus years for them to ... arise. And John even describes the disciples on Easter morning as out fishing. That's hardly the type of activity you'd go back to just 36 hours after seeing your closest comrade publicly, horrifically executed for treason. So this resurrection business is complicated, to say the least.⁷³

But whether you believe that Jesus walked out of the tomb *or* that those tales seek to name a reality deeper than fact, *the bottom line—the gospel truth, if you will—is that there WAS a bodily resurrection: the church.*

And that happened via compassion. The church was not born by affirming a set of doctrines or beliefs. It was born as Jesus' followers and friends began—sometime on the far side of the crucifixion (my guess is weeks or months afterward, but that's just a guess)—after a season of fear, grief, and confusion to recapitulate among themselves the radical compassion that Jesus had preached. And in the praxis of compassion they found Jesus "alive" in their midst again. That experience *became* the resurrection.

Resurrection is the original "extinction rebellion." It is the dramatic affirmation that *with our own bodies* we will counter every effort to extinguish the seeds of compassion that have been sown in our hearts. For Jesus, and for his first followers and friends, that compassion was incarnated primarily in a widening welcome extended to *humans* in need. While the empires of Jesus' day could surely wreak havoc on ecosystems, they had no ability to fundamentally fracture the entire planet's health. There was, of course, as yet no scientific

⁷² www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization

⁷³ I Cor. 15:3-8; Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-11; 26:13-15; Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:9-20; Luke 24:13-53; John 20: 11-29; 21:1-14. My thinking on resurrection has evolved over many years, beginning in seminary (1984) and continuing in graduate school (1992-97) in both seminars and a candidacy exam that looked at the Historical Jesus. Those most influential for me are John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), Marcus Borg, "The Truth of Easter" in *The Meaning of Jesus*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), and Willi Marxsen, *Jesus and Easter: Did God Raise the Historical Jesus from the Dead?* (Abingdon Press, 1990).

understanding of the intricate web of creation—although psalmists and prophets intuited this web as have most (maybe all) aboriginal peoples.

As I noted in “Redeemed for Resilience” (GIT, Essay #13), by the end of the fourth century the early church became the *imperial* church, and the radical compassion that drove the resurrection became reserved for saints and monastics. The majority of believers were instructed in doctrine and duty, and in many ways, the church chose to recapitulate the very dynamics of profit, power, and status that Jesus had challenged. The embers of resurrection never entirely faded, but for most of its history the church has been shaped by priorities other than radical compassion. (Yes, the church *has* fostered its share of compassion, kindness, mercy, etc. But, for the most part, the church made sure to ration these goods out in amounts that promote “good order” rather than instill them with the prodigal world-changing extravagance that Jesus did.)

Fast forward to the present day. Now “Extinction Rebellion” names a fairly new loose-knit global movement of activists committing non-violent actions to protest inaction by governments to address climate change.⁷⁴ Although secular in origin, their credo is not unlike that of the earliest Christians: to deploy their own bodies in countering the complacency that threatens to extinguish the very seeds of life that have been sown on this planet.

On one hand extinction—the complete disappearance of a life form from the biotic community—is a cosmic fact. As life bubbles up across eons, some of those bubbles go bust sooner than others. And sometimes cataclysmic cosmic events—sudden meteor strikes or slow-moving ice ages—dramatically reshape life’s context and reset the bar for survival for entire ecosystems. On the other hand—the hand that matters right now—today, we don’t face extinctions dealt out by the unfolding cosmos. We face—*we’re experiencing, as I write and as you read*—extinctions at a pace unknown since the dinosaurs died out 65 million years. At a pace some scientists say qualifies as the sixth great extinction in Earth’s long history.⁷⁵

But this round of extinction has two noteworthy characteristics. First, rather than being caused by an insentient cosmic process/event, *this* extinction is being caused *by us*. Initially (and still) driven by how human development undoes specific habitats, ripping asunder the web of flora and fauna that constitute an ecosystem, this extinction is also being amplified by climate change, the cumulative impact of an industrial society playing Russian roulette at the level of atmosphere and ocean. Second, unlike the first five extinctions, which we view from a vantage point of safety measured in millennia past, *this* extinction may well include us. All life is interconnected. There are only so many strands of the web we can extinguish before the web nearest us collapses, taking us with it.

It’s time for churches to reclaim extinction rebellion as our cause. To use our individual choices, communal practices, and civic power to strengthen the social and ecological webs that support life. Maybe even to join Extinction Rebellion in some of its theatrical (liturgical!) nonviolence. I could say we ought to do these things “because” we believe in resurrection. But, actually, *I think it’s the reverse.* Easter’s “Alleluia!” belongs to all the Earth. *Only* as we begin to rebel with our own bodies on behalf of all life, letting compassion echo evangelically in our lives, only then can we say—*only then are we saying*—“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” If you’re looking for an Easter alleluia, you’ll find it there.

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⁷⁴ www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/20/stroud-cotswold-town-that-spawned-radical-protest

⁷⁵ www.projects.propublica.org/extinctions/

Doubting Thomas ... Climate Change and Touching Hope

David R. Weiss – May 3, 2019

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If you were in church last Sunday you probably heard the familiar story (John 20:19-29) of “Doubting Thomas.” John places it exactly one week after the original Easter account, and most churches use it as the Gospel text on the first Sunday after Easter. It’s one of those stories that’s so familiar (it’s even given us “Doubting Thomas” as a idiom) that it becomes easy to think we know exactly what it means—until we realize we don’t.

Here’s the way it unfolds in John. On Easter evening the disciples are huddling in fear in an upper room. Suddenly Jesus appears to them. Except Thomas misses it. And when the disciples report it to him afterwards, he replies, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” Sure enough, one week later Jesus appears again, this time with Thomas present, and he invites Thomas to indeed place his fingers into the wounds. He tells Thomas, “Do not doubt, but believe.” (Thereby sealing his nickname for history.⁷⁶) And the scene ends with Jesus seeming to make Thomas an example of how NOT to be: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

It seems pretty straightforward. But consider a couple things.

Nobody in this account believes without seeing, so Thomas gets more than a bit of a bad rap. All the other disciples saw Jesus the first time, so it seems a little unfair to single out Thomas as though he was the only one who needed to see in order for his belief to take hold.

Second, Thomas reacts *exactly* like any of us would. By now some of us have been so conditioned to believe Jesus was raised from the dead we affirm that without even thinking about it. But how many of us would be as quick to accept a tale told (even by a good friend) about a man who died last week in a near by town, and three days later was seen walking about? How many?! I thought so.

Third, even Thomas, while seemingly scolded for his need to see, *still gets to see*. But none of us do. *And that’s who this passage is really aimed at*. John’s gospel was written, at the earliest, around 90 CE (others date it 10, even 20 years later). So John is writing for people living now sixty years after Jesus did. In other words, everybody in John’s audience from his first readers right on through us, is in the same “predicament”: *we all have to choose whether to believe or not—without seeing*. Which only heightens the tension. Does that mean all John offers *us* is a scolding of Thomas—who still gets to see—and a “blessing” for the rest of us if we can manage to do better? No.

Which brings us to climate change. It often feels as though the more you know about the dire straits we’re in, the harder it is to muster hope. To actually read the reports and study the science—even as a layperson—well, you begin to feel like those disciples huddled in that upper room. The world as you knew it has ended. And the world opening up in front of you is fringed round about with fear.

For Thomas—who, after all, *is* our example in this text—the crucial thing is not that he gets to *see*, but that he gets to *touch*. And not that he gets to touch the arms, the cheeks, etc.—but *the wounds*. His hope comes from touching the worst that the world dealt to Jesus and realizing that there is still life to be had.⁷⁷

In a sense this episode in John’s gospel is an “Easter echo” of Jesus’ words in Matthew about “the least of these” (Mt 25:31-46). In that passage Jesus suggests the place where faith is found is precisely in deeds that meet the needs of others: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Here, in John’s gospel it isn’t mere sight that makes resurrection real for Thomas, it’s the tender touch of Jesus’ wounds. And John’s subtle wisdom to us—who can neither see Jesus in our midst nor light at the end of this

⁷⁶ Actually ... Thomas *never doubts*. The Greek word for doubt is *distazo*. Jesus uses *apistos*; it means, rather more bluntly “without belief.” But it came into English as “doubt,” and that word got paired with Thomas ever since.

⁷⁷ I don’t think this is about physical resurrection. Maybe it is, but I think John is making a much more nuanced assertion here, one intended to spark our belief in the value of compassion, love, life itself.

climate crisis—is that if we wish to believe, it is less an act of will than a deed of compassion that will bring it to pass. *Hope lives in the habits we form ... provided those habits hold compassion.*

This intuition is at the heart of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone’s book, *Active Hope*,⁷⁸ an offering of practical wisdom for meeting this perilous moment. They distinguish between two meanings for hope. The first is hope rooted in *likelihood*. There’s at least a reasonable chance it will be sunny tomorrow; I sure hope so. That type of hope was beyond the reach of the disciples huddled in the upper room after the crucifixion—and beyond the reach of anyone who wades very far into the current data on climate change. Reasonable likelihood is no longer on the table.

The second meaning has to do with desire, independent of likelihood. The disciples knew he was dead and buried, but even in their fear, they could have told you they *wanted* him with them once again. So, what do you *hope for*, for your children? Push “pause” on “now be realistic,” and just ask, “What do you hope for, for them?” Chances are, the answers aren’t buried very deep.

But there’s yet one more distinction to make. When it comes to hope as desire, it can be either *passive* or *active*. Passive hope waits for outside forces to bring something to pass. As a result, passive hope can easily feel hopeless. Active Hope is participatory. *It’s a deed*. Macy and Johnstone call it a *practice*—a habit of deeds, if you will. They liken it to tai chi: a set of movements that may seem to accomplish very little, but are nonetheless done with focus and intent ... and become like water shaping rock. Far from a disposition you try to “have” as a ground your actions, Active Hope begins as an action-by-action habit that eventually grounds our disposition. Perhaps most significantly for us, Active Hope doesn’t presume optimism. It simply asks that you honor the desire of your heart and act with sincere humble focus.

It’s worth being clear: Macy and Johnstone *don’t* claim Active Hope will turn things around. They *do* believe it will turn *you* around—especially if embraced as a communal practice. That is, by choosing to actively align our energy, in even small ways, with a larger story (vision) that matches the desires of our heart, we invest ourselves (and, ideally, it is a WE doing this) in actions that “help us restore our sense of connection with the web of life and with one another.” Broadly speaking they describe this dynamism as the Work That Reconnects. I think John might describe it as the Work That Resurrects.

As Macy and Johnstone relate, this work “comes from gratitude” (begins with awe at what is) and “honors the pain of our world” (*feels* loss: let grief have its way with us). During Jesus’ ministry his disciples learned to come with gratitude; we hear that in the stories of wonder and surprise that swirl around Jesus. After his crucifixion they’re overwhelmed by the pain of their world. Initially they’re too overwhelmed even to hope. But when Thomas, in spite of his dis-belief, dares to touch the wounds, he chooses to honor the pain in the pain rather than turn away from it. And in that choice, resurrection occurs. John offers wisdom to the first Christian on how to fuel their movement: by touching the wounds of the world.

It’s essential that we honor the world’s pain and touch it with tenderness—which may include full on anguished lament. Honestly, it may or may not “save” the world. But I’m willing to bet my whole life it can “save” us and our children come what may. Which is to say, it has the ability to root our lives in Active Hope—no matter what. That’s resilience. And that’s good news, even to people huddled in fear.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaitb

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⁷⁸ Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012). In this post I’m drawing primarily on the Introduction, pp. 1-7; I’ll return to this book again.

When the Gospel Comes as Grief

David R. Weiss – May 14, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #24 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

It's been a week now since the United Nations released a new report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).⁷⁹ The Global Assessment Report, the result of three years of work by 145 researchers from 50 countries, reviews some 15,000 scientific and government sources and offers the most far-reaching appraisal to date of nature's overall health. It is *not* encouraging.

The IPBES media release opens with a gut punch: "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history." How do you quantify that? The report has a statistic to offer from almost every angle; I'll mention just one. Of the approximately 8 million total species of plants and animals (including insects) on Earth, *one million* are in danger of extinction, each one a cathedral millennia in the making.

The threat isn't entirely due to human-driven climate change. The report names the top two causes as (1) human impacts on land and water habitats and (2) direct exploitation (e.g., over-fishing). Then comes climate change, followed by pollution. But each cause reflects human activity that's been repeatedly indifferent to the needs of the natural world. This is not "creation groaning in travail" (Romans 8:22); this is *creation being relentlessly executed by the ecological inertia of our choices*.

Whatever the author of Genesis meant by according us "dominion" over creation, killing off better than 1/10 of Eden's abundance does not count. Indeed, a careful study of the word "dominion" in the Hebrew Scriptures shows that it always refers to *power-exercised-with-wisdom-and-justice*.⁸⁰ What we've done as a species—exemplified by certain "advanced" civilizations and cultures—is *not* dominion. It's mere—*sheer* destruction. In fact, by biblical standards (and in the report's judgment!), indigenous peoples living far more simply than us are perhaps the best examples of dominion on the planet today.

How do we respond to a report that is simply overwhelming in its bleakness? That catalogs so much life—habitats, ecosystems, and species—at risk? I recall a line in a film I saw decades ago (*Mass Appeal*, 1984). One character, a young seminarian, tells a story about his tank of tropical fish. One night the heater went bad and they all boiled. He recalls, "I woke up the next morning and went to feed them, but I found them all floating at the top. Most of them split in two, others with their eyes hanging out. It looked like violence, like suffering, but it had been such a quiet night. *And I remember wishing I had the kind of ears that could hear fish scream.*"

We need those kind of ears today. Neither undaunted optimism nor debilitating despair are useful now. We face a moment when, for people of faith, the gospel comes as grief. (I think this is true in secular terms as well, although it would be described somewhat differently.) Grief will be fundamental in any pursuit of the transformative change the IPBES report says is necessary: "We mean a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals, and values."

Yes, there is much to be done: changing individual choices, exerting political pressure, pursuing technological breakthroughs, and altering corporate agendas. But in the midst of all that doing, we need to root ourselves, as it were, in grief. And because our culture as a whole avoids grief, communities of faith may have a unique responsibility in this precarious moment: to work feverishly to facilitate grief.

Grief, by itself, is not nearly enough to save us, but it is a fundamentally spiritual undertaking (tapping into our emotions on an existential scale) and if we do not embrace it, everything else done by ourselves and others is little more than banter on the way to oblivion. Read that sentence again, if you have to. I'm *not* saying that politics and technology and industry (and more) have no role to play. I *am* saying—shouting if need be—that *grief is the most important entry point and the most neglected one in addressing climate change*. And every week of worship that we delay in giving voice to ecological grief as *our primary work as the church today*, we fail to be the people of faith that God and the whole of creation need us to be today.

⁷⁹ May 6, 2019: www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment

⁸⁰ Lloyd H. Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992), pp. 63-80.

But not just any grief will do. Professor Josef Settele, one the IPBES project’s co-chairs, observes, “The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed. This loss is a direct result of human activity *and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world*” (emphasis mine). I absolutely agree, but I worry his tone remains too anthropocentric. As though we must now care because WE are in peril. I disagree. For grief to be gospel, it must be larger than this.

In fact, grief expressed as our felt response to the threat now posed to human society and to our particular human loved ones, while still an honest emotion, is more like throwing an adult temper tantrum over a world whose physics and math have sorely disappointed us. It’s venting grief because the finite yet overall abundance of our home does not meet the baser appetites we’ve allowed to take root.

As a theologian, I have to say quite clearly: *any response rooted in human self-interest is doomed*. Many seem to believe the exact opposite: that we must somehow activate and leverage self-interest, our own survival instinct, to respond to this ecological crisis. I think that assumption makes two critical mistakes. It presumes we are somehow ‘separate’ from the rest of the world. But from the macro level of ecosystems to the micro level of intestinal biomes, to be self-interested is both theologically and scientifically dishonest. There is no human ‘I’ or ‘we’ that is not intrinsically *more-than-me* and *more-than-human*.⁸¹

Second, to regard it as overly idealistic (unrealistic) to call for grief on behalf of flora, fauna, and even terrain *for its own intrinsic value* is an error rooted in primal arrogance believing that our deepest energy comes from love of self rather than love of that which is other. If we grieve for the rest of creation only on account of its transactional value to us, *we preclude ourselves from tapping into the oceanic energy of the cosmos, which alone might grant us the transpersonal power necessary for this moment*.

On the other hand, grief that arises in response to our willingness to feel our connection to *all* that is imperiled, *that grief*—even as it threatens to undo us because of its intensity—can also connect us to the sacred energy that even now courses through the cosmos. In this sense, *that grief is gospel*, because it is born of our recognition that, along with all the rest of creation, we *are* at home on Earth.

But will even that grief be enough to save us? Quite frankly, I don’t know. But anything less will *not* save us; of that I’m certain. And whatever solutions politics, technology, and economics might provide, if they—*if we*—are not schooled by grief, they’ll be of marginal value. (Whatever short-term gains they offer us, will be *only short-term* if we have not done the deep work of re-rooting ourselves in the whole of creation, work that will be done first by waves of grief.)

I understand, we like our gospel to come with a ‘guarantee.’ As if anything worthy of the word ‘gospel’ *must* be able to produce news that is ultimately ‘good’ on our terms. But overall we have not yet done an honest cost accounting of the peril in front of us. Just this weekend the atmospheric CO2 measured Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii crested 415 ppm for the first time since ... *three million years ago*. That’s since before our earliest, most distant, pre-human ancestors. As far as our future goes, *all bets are off*. To say that today visceral creation-wide grief is gospel doesn’t guarantee anything except a slender *possibility* of life with integrity. Which, if you really think about it, is all gospel has ever promised.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaitb

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⁸¹ See GIT essay #4 “[Christmas: The Most Important Four Ounces in the Manger.](#)”

Threatened with Resurrection

David R. Weiss – May 16, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #25 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

“They have threatened us with resurrection.” The words come from a poem written in 1980 by Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet-theologian and peace activist.⁸² Penned in a time of fierce persecution of peasants, human rights activists, and church workers, the image evokes a holy irony: for Christians, to live under near constant threat of death is to be ... *threatened with resurrection*.

This wasn't glib optimism. During Guatemala's civil war (1960-1996) some 200,000 persons were killed. Death squads were common, as were torture, assassination, mutilation, rape, and 'disappearances.' To suggest that living under such conditions was, in fact, to be “threatened with resurrection,” was an act of revolutionary inward defiance. It declared: Because we do not regard death as the end of our story—for it was *not* the end of Jesus' story—therefore, even in times like these, “we go on loving life” (the last five words are drawn from the poem itself).

Climate change is NOT state-sponsored terrorism. But it *will* (in some places it already *does*) mean living in the face of daily unpredictability, chaos, suffering, and grief. And it will require a posture of revolutionary inward defiance (one aspect of the Inner Transition that is central to the Transition Movement goal of *resilience*) to cultivate both the inner and outer resources to embrace life in this new world. Which is why, especially after my last post summoning us to embrace ecological grief, it seems a good time to remind us that as Christians, *climate change threatens us with resurrection*. Which in turn invites ... *compels* us to live in the holy irony of meeting the prospect of radical uncertainty with an undaunted love for life.

This, too, is *not* glib optimism. The science around climate change is too unforgiving for that. The media spin is often shaped alternately by a foolhardy thirst for one more round of profits, or a fear-laden denial convinced it can't be *that* bad, or the naïve belief we'll invent our way out of this without needing to deeply(!) re-work the misshapen appetites and assumptions that got us here. But once you push through the spin, BLEAK is what stares back at you. And bleak doesn't blink.

Part of our problem, however, is that unlike in Guatemala, where Esquivel's poem was read against the *lived experience* of brutality (no one doubted they lived under immediate threat)—today both society and church remain largely in denial of the peril still mostly unseen in front of us. Even as anxiety over climate change creeps into the background of our daily lives, the immediacy of the threat is seldom felt. Not here. Not yet. But it is inexorably on the way. So I tend to shout. Sorry. (Not sorry.)

I get it. 'Bleak' isn't good for the market, for one's career path, or for our widespread consumptive addictions, so we find ways to push it to the side. But 'bleak' is what science tells us today, so my task is to be *unrelentingly imaginative* in making that bleakness real.⁸³

For some it already is. *The Agenda*, a Canadian public television current affairs show recently hosted a 30-minute segment on the emotional impact of climate change on those directly involved in the research.⁸⁴ Scientists, whose work places them before any spin, are increasingly wrestling with deep grief

⁸² Julia Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan* (Brethren Press, 1982).

You can find the whole poem here: www.how-matters.org/2012/08/31/julia-esquivel/

⁸³ Walter Brueggemann considers the primary task of the Hebrew prophets as *poetic*. Initially (pre-Exile), that meant finding images—sometimes spoken, sometimes embodied—sufficient to carry the grief of God and visceral enough to break through the numbness of God's people. Later (mid-Exile) it meant finding images able to awaken hope in God's people in moments when their capacity to hope was all but extinguished by the circumstances of their lives. See *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1978) and *Hopeful Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1986).

⁸⁴ www.tv.org/video/burnout-and-despair-studying-the-climate.

as they *see* an Earth unmade by human folly—sometimes first hand in habitats they’ve come to love, sometimes in climate models made by math they’ve learned to trust. While objectivity is crucial in collecting and assessing the data, when that objectivity announces existential crises for habitats and for humans even scientists are given pause.

It’s what comes after the pause that counts. Rob Law, a longtime Australian climate activist, writes, “to truly tackle the climate and extinction crisis we also need to give ourselves permission to grieve, personally and collectively.”⁸⁵ Why? Not as an exercise in self-defeat, but as a means to clear the way for action. Acknowledging our grief, Low continues, allows us “to create new ways of connecting to one another, to mourn for what we all love and are losing day by day ... and to galvanize what is most important.” Michael Mann, a leading climate scientist, agrees, commenting in the *Agenda* segment, “It’s not a matter of are we ‘effed’ or not [as though it’s a simple binary either/or], it’s a matter of *how* ‘effed,’ and *that* is left for us to determine—and that requires us to become active participants in reducing whatever carbon burn we can.”

We don’t gain anything by denying the bleakness of our present situation. In fact, denial—as well as a too-easy optimism—only heightens the risk for all of us ... for all of Earth. But we need not be paralyzed by it either. As Christians, the more we dare to really hear the science, such as the IPCC report from last fall or the IPBES report from last week,⁸⁶ the more we *will* find ourselves threatened with resurrection.

Our response should be to manifest an undaunted love for life. The Transition Movement offers us uncanny (even providential) insight into the shape of that response, and I’ll explore Christian adaptations of Transition in a series of posts over the summer. But fundamentally, to be threatened with resurrection—as those living in Guatemala in the 1970’s and 1980’s knew firsthand—is to *begin from grief*. It is to recognize that the wellspring of our action (which must be manifold) is the grief we dare to feel for the whole of creation.

Moving into this grief, making it part of our faith and witness in the twenty-first century, is our foremost calling as Christian communities today. (And there is more that must be written about, too.) But calling for grief is, in a sense, *good news*. Biblical faith has never been afraid of grief. It is the ground out of which resurrection comes. And if there is hope for a restored future on the far side of calamity that is yet to be weathered, it will be because we dared to grieve.

If we believe in a God who works miracles with mustard seeds, then grief is the mustard seed we must sow today. We, who are threatened with resurrection.

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⁸⁵ www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/i-have-felt-hopelessness-over-climate-change-here-is-how-we-move-past-the-immense-grief.

⁸⁶ IPCC report: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>; IPBES report: www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment.

Permaculture: Becoming Friends with God

David R. Weiss – May 25, 2019

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“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22). This is the moment of “Pentecost” (the sending of the Holy Spirit) in John’s Gospel.

Luke’s much more vivid Pentecost narrative (rushing wind, tongues of flames, and speaking in other languages—in Acts 2) happens on the fiftieth day after Passover. (Hence, the name Pentecost: Greek for “fiftieth” and the Greek name for the Jewish harvest festival of first fruits celebrated on this fiftieth day. In John’s Gospel “Pentecost” happens about fifty *seconds* after Jesus makes his first resurrection appearance to the disciples on Easter evening.⁸⁷ Seriously, he appears in the room—seemingly moving through walls and locked doors—announces himself by saying, “Peace be with you,” shows the disciples his wounds, and then we go immediately into verse 20 as quoted above. Breath, Spirit, Pentecost. Bam.

I propose, though, that we call John’s version of Pentecost, *the Permaculture Moment of Easter*, because John shows Jesus establishing the post-Easter community of believers as a permaculture community. I can’t say whether those first Christians fully appreciated that, but I will say that *the very meaning and purpose of the church today hinges on recognizing its call to be a permaculture community today* as we meet the climate emergency on our doorstep.

Permaculture? You won’t find it in your catechism or creed; it’s not exactly a theological term (though I’d argue it ought to be). Permaculture is a design philosophy for thinking about agriculture ... and human culture.⁸⁸ It emerged in the late 1970’s as a way of critically rethinking (and rejecting) the steady growth of industrialized agriculture. Seeing a multitude of problems connected with an agricultural model that was increasingly determined to enslave the soil by means of machinery and chemicals, permaculture, in essence, chose to *listen* to the land instead.

Permaculture begins with the presumption that most (if not all) of the challenges we face in producing food (or, ultimately, in the other aspects of our lives) have already been faced—at least analogously—by nature. And, having the benefit of a timescale far beyond us, nature has found solutions to these problems. Nature may think slowly, but it is utterly undaunted, and it holds within it, quite literally, the wisdom of eons. So permaculture developed twelve design principles—drawn from how nature approaches problem-solving—as a framework for our own way of being in relative harmony with nature.

Besides the twelve principles (which are more complex than we need to know for this column), permaculture has three core tenets: (1) Care for Earth—treating the soil (and really all ecosystems) in ways that promote flourishing for all creatures in the Earth community; (2) Care for People—that the necessities of life (both material and social) be available to all; (3) Return of Surplus—that we take not more than our fair share and reinvest the surplus back into the system or within our community.

Permaculture began as an agricultural movement (it was first known as “permanent agriculture”), but rather quickly became a way of thinking about the whole of human culture since all agriculture sits within a broader social-cultural context. I’m thinking about permaculture today because it’s the philosophical infrastructure for the Transition Movement. Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the Transition Movement, was himself a permaculture instructor, and, in many ways, he imagined Transition Towns as adaptations of permaculture principles to a more urban (or at least a village-neighborhood) context.

⁸⁷ John describes an encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden outside the empty tomb on Easter morning, but the evening scene is the first time John describes an encounter with the rest of the disciples.

⁸⁸ Rob Hopkins, a permaculture instructor himself, admits the concept is “notoriously difficult to explain in a single sentence.” My portrait here is drawn from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008, pp. 60-61, 136-141), and augmented by www.permacultureprinciples.com/principles/.

But where does Jesus fit in? We begin with the Hebrew Scriptures where Wisdom is acknowledged as a divine attribute (at times even a divine feminine person) present at creation. In Proverbs (8:22-31) and Sirach⁸⁹ (ch. 24), Wisdom is the presence of God that patterns Itself/Herself into creation. In other words, Hebrew Scripture affirms that *Wisdom is at work in the patterns seen in nature*. The language is far more spiritual than permaculture uses, but the intuition is the same. Moreover, the Hebrew notion of Sabbath rest for people-animals-land anticipates the holistic ethic of permaculture core tenets.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is deliberately likened to Wisdom. Described as "the Word" (Greek: *logos*) in John's prologue, Jesus is linked both to God's creative word at creation, and also to Wisdom present with God during creation. In Greek, *logos* means not simply "word," but also the "wise principle" or pattern behind something. John 1:1-3 clearly aims to evoke Proverbs and Sirach in the ears of its Jewish audience. And when John writes (1:14), "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," his readers likely heard Baruch 3:37, "Afterward she [Wisdom] appeared upon earth and lived among men."

Elsewhere Wisdom invites her followers to feast (Proverbs 9:1-5, Sirach 24:9-21); promising that she alone provides bread and drink that satisfies. When John has Jesus offer living water (Jn 4:13-14) and the bread of life (Jn 6:31-35), he is again telling his community that Jesus is God's Wisdom in their midst. Finally, in his long Last Supper discourse, John has Jesus announce a new relationship with his disciples: no longer servants, he calls them "friends" (Jn 15:15). Which brings us back—almost, to the Easter-breath scene. In the book of Wisdom (likely written in the century immediately before Jesus lived) we read, "Wisdom is a *breath* of the power of God and ... In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them *friends* of God" (Wisdom 7:25-27).

Throughout John's densely symbolic Gospel, he is convinced that one way to understand Jesus is as the embodiment of the Wisdom of God. And in his "Pentecost" moment, *John shows Jesus passing the breath of that Wisdom on to his followers and through this Holy Spirit making them friends with God*.

Today's climate crisis is the direct result of humans (many of them "Christian") failing to discern the wisdom present in creation and instead choosing to treat nature as devoid of wisdom: mere raw material for meeting human desire. But—like permaculture—the Wisdom tradition in Hebrew Scripture sees nature as bearing Wisdom's imprint. And, by linking Jesus to that tradition again and again, John's Gospel tells us: to be a follower of Jesus is to become a friend of God, to recognize the echo of Wisdom in Jesus' life, ... and to discern the pattern of that same Wisdom in the natural world around us.

In John's Gospel, *the first thing* Jesus does in meeting his disciples on Easter evening is *breathe on them*—stepping directly into the Wisdom tradition and breathing his followers into friendship with God *and God's world* (seeing God's Wisdom writ within nature is *inescapably part of friendship with God*).

It would be our *moral* duty to embrace permaculture principles (and become Transition communities) in response to the climate crisis, if only because these things best position us to preserve what we can and to grieve for what we cannot preserve. But John's Gospel makes clear that, for those who follow Jesus, something more than "mere" morality at stake. *Permaculture is how we befriend God*.

I cannot imagine a greater act of joy. So take a deep ... breath, and let's get started.

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⁸⁹ Sirach, Baruch, and Wisdom (both mentioned below) are *apocryphal* books: among a handful of ancient Jewish texts that are pre-Christian but are not considered part of the Hebrew Scriptures. Though not regarded as sacred by Jews, these writings helped form the context against which John was interpreting Jesus.