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Text: John 21:1-19

### *Earth-Born Companions*

Allie knew the woods around Pilgrim Lodge better than anyone else. She was seemingly always in uniform: a dusty ball cap topped her greying pixie cut, t-shirt tucked into shorts, and Chaco sandals clad feet that effortlessly charged up hills. In the summer of 2007, she had the responsibility of training me as the camp's Nature Education Director.

As is common for new teachers, I was essentially reading a chapter ahead. Before I took the kids out on a hike, Allie would take me out first. She walked almost as fast as she talked with relentless enthusiasm, and I worked hard to organize my mental notes. That big boulder is a glacial erratic—it's likely been here since the last ice age. That swampy area is a good place to find frogs. That gray looking plant is Indian pipe—it grows without sunlight.

When she slowed down, I knew we were onto something good. She rolled a downed birch tree with her foot to show me the worms, and her face lit up! A black salamander with yellow spots wriggled loose. "Wow," she exclaimed, "You will want to make sure the kids see that. They are the coolest little creatures." She went on in delight and was equally thrilled when we came across a garter snake off the side of the trail.

She responded to each encounter with common creatures of the forest as if she were unexpectedly bumping into family. She had such respect for them that she treated them, in the spirit of John Muir, as her "earth-born companions" and "fellow mortals." She called herself a naturalist, but I now understand her as a modern day Francis of Assisi. She too, would spend entire days simply admiring the smallest of creatures. She carried the same reverence for nature that prompted Francis refer to the sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, and the entirety of earth itself as brother and sister. They understood our common lot, our interdependence as God's creatures.

This awareness of our connectedness defined Jesus' ministry. As he so often does, he uses the gifts of the earth, bread, wine, and in today's case fish, to feed the spiritual hunger of the people. He is acutely aware of how nature's beauty can feed us and fill us with joy. He retreats to the solitude of the desert and hills to pray. His teachings invoke lilies of the fields, the birds of the air, and the growth of the tiniest seeds in the garden. He reveals his divine self against the backdrop of beautiful mountaintop vistas at the Transfiguration, and he reveals his resurrected self to them on the shores of the Galilee, which to this day is deliciously beautiful. Jesus has a taste for such beauty. By his words and deeds, Jesus invites us feast on the natural world.

In addition to the joyous appearance and communion meal, this morning's reading lifts up the responsibility that comes with resurrection and new life in Christ. After hosting the generous Easter breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time the disciple, who represents us all, replies in the affirmative, and Jesus offers another image — rooted in his connection to the natural world. "Tend my sheep," Jesus commands him, "Feed my lambs." We cannot separate our new life in Christ from our caring for others, a growing sphere of concern for our neighbors. Drawing on scripture, the meditations of mystics like Francis, and hikes with my friend Allie, I believe this call to care and serve extends beyond our fellow human beings, but to the entirety of the creation.

While last night concert was primarily upbeat and energizing, Paul Winter did offer some poignant words. He lamented the loss of seals in the arctic, timber wolves in woods of Minnesota, and the wood thrushes near his home in Litchfield. He noted our patterns of development are affecting the environment, encroaching upon their habitats, and diminishing their populations.

Others are presenting the problem more forcefully. Human development has prompted changes to our environment that is dangerously heating up the globe. The uptick of extreme weather, economic disruption, and refugee crises induced by human-caused climate change will continue to increase. There is no turning back the clock, only working to mitigate the problem.

Because the effects of our action and inaction are realized generations after us, a way forward requires a bold come-to-Jesus moment. Bill McKibben writes, "We've got to get outside our comfort zones. Because the planet is outside its comfort zone—way outside...We need a relentless moral challenge to the powers and principalities currently taking our planet if not to hell then to someplace of a remarkably similar temperature."

Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* forcefully argues that our response to human-caused climate change must be a multi-prong approach. Since climate change affects vulnerable wildlife and people most, our solutions must prioritize their needs. Addressing our individual behaviors will help, but we need also to challenge the political and economic systems that got us into this mess to truly help the vulnerable. It's the only way to strike the balance of healthy development that doesn't jeopardize the health of our souls.

Jesus does not separate the good news of his resurrection from his devotion to the needy. He returns to his homeland, the backwater of Galilee to share in his abundance and at that very meal encourages them to care for the needy. To love Jesus is to tend to his lambs.

When I was in high school, I spent a lot of time with a friend whose mother kept sheep. When she fell on hard times, she struggled to keep up with the chores. As a favor to her, I agreed to help my friend muck out the sheep stall that had not been cleaned in years. The sheep droppings formed a dense new floor that was over a foot above the level of the rest of the barn.

Pitch forks in hand, my friend and I got to work. It was by far the foulest job I've ever done. You would begin to acclimate to the smell and then you would break up a new patch that would hit your nostrils like you were smelling it for the very first time. Caring for sheep is hard and sometimes unpleasant work. It's no surprise to me that Jesus that immediately after telling the disciples to feed his sheep, he tells them that this may require them to go where do not wish to go. Just ask a farmer, love will take you place you never intended.

As Easter reminds us, God is still showing up and offering us abundant love, even in unsavory places. The nature of that love is that it's not meant to be hoarded; that's how we have brought about a world that is desperate to be renewed and refreshed. We've made a mess and our home needs a good mucking out. Mercifully, Christ, through whom all of creation came and still comes into being, is making the world anew. Christ is showing us a better way forward for the planet and ourselves. He is calling out, "Tend my lambs...Follow me." The way forward can be hard but at the same time joyous. In our wonder of nature and our care for creation's vulnerable, we discover Jesus at our side. A joyous resurrection moment indeed!

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