

Easter 5C

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

REVELATION 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Several summers ago I went hiking with some friends in the beautiful mountains of Glacier National Park in Montana. The vistas there are so beautiful that it has been nicknamed “The Crown of the Continent.” However, while we were walking we came upon a long portion of the trail that descended into a valley that had been completely burned to the ground just a few summers before by a wildfire. This charred landscape got our immediate attention because of how different it looked from the rest of the trail we had been traveling. This did not look like anyone’s crown at all. Most of the rest of the trail had tall evergreens towering overhead, casting dappling shadows to the path at our feet. This second of the trail, by contrast, was wide open to the sun. All the trees in this area had been burned to a crisp—quite literally—and now stood there leafless, like black matches against the sky. There was not one inch of green or even brown on the hundreds, thousands of trees that surrounded us. The fire had just consumed everything in its path, burning every living and non-living thing so quickly and completely that the forest had this frozen feeling, as if it had stopped in its tracks. Some of the tree trunks had since fallen to the ground under the weight of wind and snow. Bare, burned branches were scattered willy-nilly on the forest floor, making it look even less like a regular woodland area and more like a sloppy lumberyard.

Perhaps you’ve seen the aftermath of a wildfire. We found it to be a very bleak landscape, except for the fact that the ground all around us on each side of the trail was amazingly lush and green and covered with bright pink flowers. In fact, the vegetation was so thick that in the section of the trail alone we were not able to step off the trail without getting tangled in the underbrush. We walked through this other-worldly valley—charred, dead trees with bright green undergrowth—with a feeling that I can only describe as enchantment. Even though the fire had been destructive, new growth was springing to life very quickly. Call it the circle of life, call it nature’s way of garbage control. To three pastors on a hike it felt like it should be called “Resurrection Valley.”

John of Patmos, writing on his little island of exile at the end of the first century, gives us a glimpse of God’s final plan for creation and the ultimate fulfillment of his kingdom, and it sounds something like Resurrection Valley. In that vision, which he describes in the book of Revelation, we see a God who wants to make all things new. We see a God who doesn’t want to snatch his creatures away from a broken world, but one whose work is, at heart, renewing, refreshing, redemptive, almost like the aftermath of the wildfire we witnessed in Montana. God wants to take what God has already fashioned and re-make it. God wants to purify and cleanse creation, of course, so that it may not be tainted with things like sin and broken relationships and even death, but God’s intention is never just to get rid of everything altogether, like a heap of trash that is gathered up and tossed into an incinerator. God is making all things new, John’s vision declares. Not making all things over.

We might perhaps notice how this bears a contrast to the way we often speak of and picture God’s heavenly kingdom. Often we get the impression that God’s kingdom is some “pie in the sky,” disembodied state or place where God makes off with us after we die so that we don’t have to be connected to the awful stuff of this earth anymore. Lots of our Christian hymns even speak of heaven this way—like God’s plan is to remove us completely from here and all the

awful things earth contains. Through the words of John's revelation, which is based on his experience of Jesus' words and resurrection, God promises a very different vision: *The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.*"

This life is not something from which we need an escape, at death or any other time. It is more like Resurrection Valley, something which God has made for us but has gone wrong because of sin. God's home is among us, among God's creation; therefore where it has gone awry, God will make it new. God will fix it. And even the areas we think are long-since ruined will somehow be re-made and re-fashioned into new life—a new heaven and a new earth. This is great news. God sees things in our lives and in our world as redeemable even when we are too angry or sad or grief-stricken to do so.

It is not some fire or other cosmic event, though, through which God will make this new earth and new heaven. It is through Christ that it is already happening. The cross and Jesus' own resurrection stand as our reminder that God is determined to make all things new. We may look out in nature or in our lives and already see examples of how things that are old are becoming new again, but as followers of Jesus we know that the life and death of Jesus is our best example, our most complete equation of how God is bringing his new heaven and new earth. On the cross, God steps into all of the emptiness and decay of creation in the skin of one man. He steps into all of the dying and sorry and mourning and oppression and violence and never let go of his Father's promises so that on the third day he himself can be made new again. He, the new creation, walks around with us and breaks bread with us to renew us in faith. The home of God is among mortals, remember? Eating and resting and hanging out with your people is how you make your home among others, and Jesus does that with his followers in those first days after his resurrection. This is the One John sees seated upon the throne of God's eternal kingdom saying, "See? I am making all things new."

So, in the meantime, how might Christ be making all things new among us? Surely sharing in his sacraments is one way. He re-creates us with his forgiveness as we share the bread and the wine and as we bring people through the waters of baptism. He dwells with mortals through these earthy things. And as we extend this reconciliation to each other Jesus continues to walk about, bringing people into God's embrace. Even the hope we receive when we hear the crucified and risen Jesus proclaimed in the Scriptures gives us new life. It lifts our eyes towards that ultimate hope of God's future where there will be no more mourning and crying or pain. He will wipe every tear from their eyes and death will be no more. This certain hope surely helps make us new this very day.

All of the ways through which Jesus makes us new are expressions of his love, and his is a love that looks a lot different from the love we've seen on the rest of the trail of life, those forms of love that the world often offers us instead. Jesus' love is called *agape*, and it is the deep, sacrificing, selfless love that the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father. This is the essence of the new commandment that Jesus gives his followers on the night when he first gathers them for this meal to forgive sins. This love that they share for each other, this *agape*, will be the way that others will know that God is re-creating the earth through Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus in recognizably human form is not with us in this age, he is still very much physically present with us because he has given us the command and the ability to share his *agape* love with one another. Loving relationships where we reach out in selflessness make us new beings and get us ready to reside in the new heaven and new earth. God makes his home among mortals still through the tangible ways we express Christ-like love for each other.

This is important because I think we can be tempted to look at the wreckage of our lives and write it all off as unsalvageable refuse. We take stock of who we are and the paths we've taken and think it's irredeemable, just charred landscape good for no thing. A close friend of mine was diagnosed with a life-threatening blood disorder several years ago. The doctors told him he had a few years before it changed into an incurable form of cancer. His life felt unsalvageable. But, as it turns out, there was a way to save him. It involved a bone marrow transplant, a risky procedure that basically takes a person to the point of death and then re-inserts bone marrow stem cells from another person. My friend found a perfect match when someone on the other side of the world selflessly offered to give some of their marrow. That person did not gain anything from the donation. But it saved my friend's life, from the inside out, making him completely new.

Agape love is like that. *Agape* naturally creates new beginnings. *Agape* moves Jesus to stoop down and wash his disciples' feet, dirty and untouchable though they are, to make them new. *Agape* love seeks the good of the other person even when there is nothing to gain. Whether it is the pain of a divorce or the loneliness of addiction or the lingering decay of anger or betrayal in our relationships, or the sense of worthlessness that depression can impart to a life, or the pain from abuse, *agape* knows it all can—and will—be made new.

Suzanne Guthrie, an Episcopal priest who used to serve as an advisor to students at Vassar College, tells the story of love's power to make things new even in this earth. She writes:

A friend of mine who served in the military during World War II (and is now a nun) was once at a conference with two men, a German and an American. As they wiped dishes one evening after dinner they exchanged stories about the war. The American told of the horror he felt as a young pilot during a particularly savage bombing of a city in Germany. He had orders to bomb the hospital, which he would know by the huge red cross painted on the roof. The second man—after regaining his composure—revealed that his wife had been giving birth to their baby in that very hospital when it was being bombed. My friend tiptoed out of the room as the two men fell into each other's arms weeping. Imagine being in heaven at the end of the world, where we might fall weeping upon one another, waves of reconciliation breaking upon us as we adjust ourselves to this dimension of pure love.¹

When the Holy Spirit empowers us to “adjust ourselves to the dimension” of pure love, we are part of the new earth and new heaven Christ is bringing about. Even now. We are donors of self for a new creation. Of course, in John's vision of this, there will be no mourning or crying or pain, for the first things will have passed away. But I can imagine there will be tears of overwhelming relief and joy, weeping grounded in the healing that God's love always accomplishes. Since that is where this trail is heading—to a renewed place where God fully dwells with us and all the chaos of divisions fall away, to the place where the Alpha reaches the Omega and never ends—then I can keep walking, can't you? I can keep walking through this Resurrection valley. For Jesus, the one seated on the throne, the one who makes all things new, will never leave us.

Thanks be to God!

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¹ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2123>