

“It is remarkable for me to remember that the great story of creation and redemption doesn’t begin and end in the halls of power or on a battlefield with kings and troops. Instead, it begins and ends in a garden.” With this quotation from Kristofer Coffman, my friend Pr. Karen Bockelman has organized a meaningful Easter Vigil theme this year at Gloria Dei where I serve. Scripture readings, including descriptions of the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the Tree of Life in Revelation, will be interwoven with verses of “There in God’s Garden” (ELW 342) and culminate in the account of our Lord’s resurrection in the Gospel of John. There in that garden, the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, who takes him for a gardener.

Perhaps it was dirt on his fingernails that was a sign, Pr. Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests, one that leads her to describe how God gets God’s hands dirty in the business of resurrection, reaching down into the dirt and death and messiness of the world to take hold of us where we are and raise us up to new life. It is a fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision of the new heaven and the new earth the LORD is creating where animals will rest peaceably and people will no longer weep in distress or displacement, or bear children for calamity, but be able to live long in one place, eating what they plant, their work bearing fruit that will last. Jesus took hold of Mary, and gave her new life by casting out her demons. The seeds of faith he planted in Mary come to fruition in her recognition of the Lord to whom she belongs, and in her testimony of his appearance to her as the first witness of the resurrection. Into what dirt, what messiness, what soil of the world is God reaching today, to take hold of what is precious and raise it up to new life? Into what places are we, like Mary, being sent to bear witness to Christ’s resurrection presence?

The following are the words to my reflection last year for the Resurrection video in the “Moments of Arising” series. It can be viewed at <http://www.nemnsynod.org/moments-of-arising-series.html>

*All resurrection stories begin in the dark.* When God created the heavens and the earth, *darkness* covered the face of the deep before God spoke the light. The Exodus liberation account opens with God’s people in bondage. And it’s in the *dark belly of a whale* where a contrite Jonah prays and is saved, to receive and offer others a second chance. These and other stories told at the Easter Vigil have their fulfillment in the resurrection of our Lord, which they help reinterpret as God’s new creation, new deliverance, and ultimate salvation once and for all. Yet they all begin *in the dark*. So it’s not surprising that when Mary came to the tomb that morning *it was still dark*. It’s not surprising, for the chaos of that horrible day of death still lingered. It’s not surprising, for we have been there ourselves. Standing in a place of tragedy, of death, finding it not like we expected. “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where he is,” she says. No mention of God yet, just some “*they*” and “*we don’t know*” – the basic framework of dialogue in a hospital room awaiting results, or when another Black body is killed, or when waters or soils, air or habitats are degraded or imperiled. Mary speaks for many when sorrow or uncertainty overcome us, when it’s difficult to say *where God is*, when we feel at the mercy of powers beyond our control, and all we can do is weep.

Yet the *darkness is where resurrection stirs*, the dark earth where seed becomes grain, the dark tomb where Jesus rises from death to greet Mary and us, the dark sanctuary where the Easter Vigil cantor sings, “Rejoice O church, O earth! ... O night truly blessed, which alone was

worthy to know the time and the hour in which Christ arose ... The holiness of this night puts wickedness to flight, washes sin away, restores innocence to the fallen and joy to those who mourn; casts out hate, brings peace, and humbles pride.” Even when hope seems lost, when the beloved is crushed by the domination system of the day, when the moment seems darkest, God’s best transforming work has already begun.

Some years ago, I cut open an avocado and discarded the pit. But then I saw it had a little shoot so I planted it in some soil. Weeks went by and it didn’t appear to be doing anything. With company coming, free space was needed on the counter and it was time to say goodbye. But when I pulled up the pit, the root had fanned out into more roots! I quickly put it back and soon there was a stem that sprouted green leaves. That plant, which I still have, attests to second chances and to the truth of Easter: a seed all but in the trash with a root pointing to new life. Like a tree standing in the snow with budding branches. Or a cross embracing a crushed world that becomes a sign of hope and fruit-bearing possibilities.

The story of a river estuary’s recovery starts with hearing how it had been an industrial waste dump. The comeback of species starts with those alarmed at the closeness of extinction. How we reach an ecological civilization of equity, clean energy, and collaboration starts with recognizing our injustices, our addiction to extraction, and our estrangement from each other today. In a funeral sermon, Martin Luther once preached that when a believer lives a life that embraces death, she or he “sows a resurrection presence in this world.” The sprouting and growing, the emerging of God’s Easter in our lives, happens beneath the surface, by God’s grace, through processes we may not see and cannot fully explain. Yet the *darkness is where resurrection stirs*, where one root suddenly fans out into more roots, where people of faith who are joined to Christ in baptism are empowered to plant and water and embrace suffering and death in the world with confidence in God, whose best transforming work has already begun – in Jesus living, the firstborn of all creation, arising green. Thanks be to God for renewing our hope in Christ, hope for all children of earth. So, what is your resurrection story? Where does it begin?



*The Rev. Dr. David Carlson is pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Duluth, MN and co-chair of the Northeastern MN Synod EcoFaith Network. Originally from Denver, CO, he holds theological degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and Luther Seminary. “Earth Stewardship and the Missio Dei: Participating in the Care and Redemption of All God Has Made” is the title of his Doctor of Ministry thesis, which he defended in 2016. Pastor Dave believes the church in general and Lutherans in particular are well suited to help society address ecological needs and the problems of climate change, and that congregations are ideal settings for modeling the kind of earth stewardship needed for a more sustainable world.*