

Earth Day Sunday 2026, 3rd Sunday of Easter Year A 2026;

Gospel: Luke 24: 13-35

“In the name of the Creator God, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen”

The Encounter

Good morning, and welcome to our annual celebration of Earth Day, which is next Wednesday, April 22nd. You will notice that the liturgy is quite different from our usual one. We will talk more about Earth Day in a few minutes. Cynthia and I spent most of the past week visiting family in Nashville. We stayed with our son Mark and his family, which includes three of our grandchildren. The oldest of these, Bobby, is 13. Bobby is quite mature for his age. He is intelligent, sensitive, and interested in learning about pretty much everything, including religion, his own faith, and Jesus. The family is active in their church and attends every Sunday. I was talking to Bobby after the Sunday service at their church, and as we were talking about the sermon he just heard, I told him that when I write a sermon I try to have a primary message, what we call the “core affirmation statement.” I asked Bobby to tell me about the pastor’s sermon that day. He said the gospel was about Jesus’ healing of the paralyzed man at the pool in Beth-ZAY-tha. He then said that the main message he learned was that we all have “encounters” with Jesus, and like the paralyzed man in the gospel we often don’t realize it when it happens. The core affirmation statement, he went on to say, was to “stay open for such encounters.” Well, needless to say, I was impressed with my grandson Bobby.

We got home from Nashville on Monday, and in the early morning hours that night, while drifting in that state somewhere between dreaming and barely awakening, it came to me that my sermon today should be about how and where we encounter Christ. Of course our gospel from Luke today about the encounter of the two disciples with Jesus on the road to Emmaus fits nicely with this theme. Those two disciples walking with Jesus had no clue who it was they had encountered as they walked, not until Jesus was at the table with them,

broke and blessed the bread, and gave it to them. Only then were their eyes opened, and they recognized him. Importantly I think, he then vanished from their sight, perhaps as if to say “I have been with you all along, only you didn’t realize it. Stay open to such encounters with me. I will always be with you.” “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?” they said. Some encounter, don’t you think? Where is it that we have such encounters? I know of a place where such encounters are common, that is within creation itself, and that is a good segue into our special celebration today.

As I mentioned before today is our Earth Day Sunday, a worldwide celebration of our home planet Earth and its environment, and a reminder of our calling to care for it. This annual celebration began on April 22 of 1970, when twenty million people took to the streets and college campuses in hundreds of cities to protest environmental ignorance and to demand a new way forward to protect the Earth. That first Earth Day is largely credited as one of the key moments that launched the modern environmental movement, including the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency later that year, an essential agency now being threatened by our unenlightened and obstructive administration. The theme for Earth Day 2026 is “Our Power, Our Planet.” This theme reflects a fundamental truth: environmental progress doesn’t depend on any single administration or election, although today we are facing especially damaging environmental policies in Washington. Nonetheless, progress is sustained by daily actions of communities, educators, workers, and families protecting where they live and work. We saw this very type of action this past Tuesday evening with the documentary “Sallie’s Ashes” here at All Saints. That documentary is about three women, all in their 70s, all grandmothers, one named Sallie Smith who sadly has now died from lung cancer. These women decided that they had to do something about the potentially disastrous Alabama Power’s Plant Barry coal Ash pond, which contains 21 million tons of toxic coal ash sludge now polluting our groundwater with arsenic, cobalt, mercury and

other heavy metals. The pond is the size of 451 football fields and sits near the bank of the Mobile River in the Tensaw Delta, up Highway 43 just south of Mount Vernon, here in our own back yard. It is held in place by a single earthen dike. Were that dike to break—as has happened elsewhere in the United States including in Kingston, Tennessee—due to a major rainfall event or hurricane winds, it would be a disaster for the delta and Mobile Bay and the lives of all of us in this area. These three women have rallied to fight for the removal of that pollution and its potential for disaster. This fits right into the theme of Earth Day this year, that every individual has the power to create change. Community cleanups, tree plantings, demonstrations, contacting elected officials, educating our friends and neighbors, and making sustainable daily choices are all ways to use our power to heal our home Earth. While the current administration is doing so much to stand in the way of progress with the environment, the theme “Our Power, Our Planet” calls us to act in the face of such obstruction, and that we the people can and hopefully will overcome any and all such obstacles along the road to healing the Earth. The website earthday.org lists 50 ways for individuals to help the planet every day. There is a lot we can do.

And what does all of this have to do with our message today about encounters with Christ? I believe that the created world is full of such encounters, if we like the disciples with Jesus on the road to Emmaus will only open our eyes and minds to see them. The reason for this is that all of creation—the universe itself—is the expression and revelation of its maker, the Creator. In John’s prologue it is the Christ who “was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.” We are all united—every created thing—by our source the Creator. When we are open to see the Christ this way—open to the many encounters we will find in the created order—then we will find ways to care for it. Our calling is to re-establish a loving relationship with creation, with the Cosmic Christ present within all things. Where do we see it?

Everywhere! Jesus puts it well in the gospel of Thomas: “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” Animals of all types —those on and beneath the ground, in the sky, and in the water—the plants, the trees, and the living Earth itself are all our relatives. We are made of the same elements. We share almost exactly the same DNA. There is one life, one breath that we all breathe. Everything is interrelated, interconnected, interdependent. We are part of one living system, a unified whole. I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it. She calls this unified whole “The Luminous Web,” and God is in all of it. We must live in harmony with the rest of creation. Spend time out of doors, beyond the walls of our homes, and look at the beauty there. Feel the life all around you. See if you experience that sense of spiritual communion with the Earth, a spirituality born of our source the Creator, from whom came the elements of the entire universe, our solar system, Earth, and out of the Earth ourselves. This will motivate us to stay aware, to stay informed, to stay educated about the current state of affairs, and to act in ways to protect our environment, an environment which is now being further damaged and destroyed by the policies of the current administration.

I will share a few quotes that I found to be meaningful in our celebration of the Earth and its environment.

From the environmental activist and farmer Wendell Berry: “The Earth is what we all have in common.”

From the Native American proverb: “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.”

From Albert Einstein: “Look deep into nature and then you will understand everything better.”

From the Dalai Lama: “It is our collective and individual responsibility to preserve and tend to the world in which we all live.”

So back to our gospel today, and to this Earth Day Celebration. How and where do we see the Christ? Is it in the sacraments such as the breaking of the

bread as we will do in just a few minutes? Is it in the beauty of the world around us? Perhaps the question for all of us, just as my grandson Bobby said about Jesus healing the paralyzed man, is where and when have we encountered Christ and didn't know it? Is it in a quiet sunset? Is it in the infinite stars and galaxies of the night sky? Is it in the fragile beauty of a creature, a coastline, a tree? And what would it mean for our eyes to be opened? Perhaps then we will see the earth not as an object but as a neighbor, not as a possession but as a gift, not as something disposable but as something to be loved and protected. Earth Day invites us into that same kind of awakening, an opening of the eyes, a transformation of how we see. And when our eyes open, we like the disciples respond. The encounter leads to action. Earth Day reminds us that caring for creation becomes one way we respond to that encounter with the Christ therein. We live differently. We consume more thoughtfully. We protect what is fragile. We care for what God has made. We teach our children to love the earth, not just to use it.

The good news of the road to Emmaus is this: Christ is nearer than we think. The Christ walks with us on every road, every journey we take. When our eyes are opened, we discover that the whole world is charged and alive with the presence. It is all holy ground. Creation itself becomes a place of encounter, a place of revelation, a place where our hearts like those of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus might begin to burn within us. So let us walk more slowly. Let us look more closely. And may our eyes be opened so that we may recognize the Christ with us along all the many roads we travel in our lives, and in the good earth God has made. Then, I think, we will take better care of our home Earth.

Rev. Bob Donnell