

Easter 2/St. Thomas Sunday/Earth Day  
April 23, 2017  
John 20:19-31

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### **The Genius of Place**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today, we are attempting quite a feat. We are trying to blend the Second Sunday of Easter with St. Thomas Sunday and Earth Sunday, with a Reformation 500 component. As you likely know by now, St. Thomas started officially on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1960 in the Indiana Memorial Union with 64 charter members and their 27 children. We observe that event each year on the Second Sunday of Easter because of the gospel reading for today, depicting St. Thomas as needing to see in order to believe. The reading invites us to be inspired to devotion apart from the sense of sight: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (Jn. 20:29)

It is also Earth Sunday, with Earth Day having been celebrated yesterday with various events, including the Earth Day Festival in Indianapolis and the March for Science at many locations, including Bloomington.

In consultation with the Council, the Worship Committee, and the Reformation 500 Task Force, we decided it would be helpful to blend these into a single celebration today, to include a blessing of the St. Thomas Community Garden, which immediately follows worship today. Those who are able will gather in the Community Garden. Those who are less mobile may participate from the narthex patio.

The Reformation 500 group is looking towards our Mayfest Celebration on Sunday, May 21<sup>st</sup>. That is my final Sunday here prior to a time of renewal (a.k.a. sabbatical in some spheres). The renewal theme relates to creation care (raise your hand if you're surprised!). With that theme and the timing, we thought this would be a great opportunity to help you all understand something of the plans for this summer. And there are some related invitations that you will see in the narthex.

So, let me bring you up to speed on this clergy and congregational renewal project. The Lilly Endowment in Indianapolis offers a small number of \$50,000 grants each year to congregations in Indiana. There is another program for other states. The Council and I prepared an application that was submitted just over a year ago. Last August, we were informed that the grant was awarded to us. It covers all costs associated with the renewal program—for the congregation and for me and my family. This includes payment for the five folks who will provide pastoral and preaching services while I'm gone. So as not to get bogged down in the details here, please pick up a copy of the Clergy Renewal brochure; there are copies on the Welcome Table.

The renewal theme is “Genius Loci” (Consulting the Genius of the Place). I think the Latin phrase helped us get the grant (☺). But it does in fact have a long history. Here’s how we introduced the theme in the application:

“At St. Thomas Lutheran Church we believe that the way forward for the whole church in a world imperiled by climate change is to seek after the genius of our places. We are reclaiming fuller biblical and theological perspectives on our relationship to place, especially the centrality of a creator God who charges us to serve and preserve the Earth and all that is in it. In creation, God has set forth the patterns that may guide us if we pay attention. Everything is connected. The interactions of varying systems reveal that sustainability involves holy webs of relationships. We envision congregations, the land they occupy, and the communities they serve as places whose vitality proclaims the glory of our creator God.

“And so, the theme “consulting the genius of the place” suggests itself. It’s a phrase that started in ancient Rome and has been expanded upon by many authors. In his “Moral Essays” Alexander Pope (18<sup>th</sup> century) advises that we “consult the genius of the place” and suggests that beauties not be forced into it, but result from it. Wes Jackson (author, founder of the Land Institute and of the “sustainable agriculture” movement) speaks of one’s place as “a canvas of sorts, a space where we can be participants in the Creation.” God’s good creation suffers because we fail to consult the genius of our places, preferring to consider creation a resource repository for human exploitation. We adapt places to our uses rather than adapt ourselves to our places. This renewal program develops principles and practices that seek to reverse this tendency, working with rather than against the created world.”

The grant application then describes the many ways St. Thomas has worked to care for creation, from using mugs on Sunday mornings to installing solar panels to constructing a community garden. Even our mission endeavors are rooted in our place. Campus ministry is both integral to our community and to this congregation’s commitments. Our connections for nearly 30 years with our Sister Parish in Guatemala arose because a member’s clergy brother started that organization. Liz Gaskins’ work with Lutheran Native congregations led to our mission partnership in Cherokee, North Carolina. A visit from a Lutheran youth from Chile fostered our social service partnership in Santiago with E.P.E.S.

Perhaps you can see how this theme is appropriate also to this St. Thomas Sunday as well as to this 500<sup>th</sup> year of Reformation. We celebrate who we are as a congregation in order to look forward to what God may yet lead us to become through a continuing Reformation and perhaps a further eco-Reformation.

This renewal program, then, is intended to assist us in studying, listening, searching scripture, and consulting more fully the genius of our place with those goals in mind.

The personal statement we included in the grant application is one I'd also like to share. Since it is all about hope, I could easily have quoted the second lesson for today: "we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 1:3) Here's what I wrote:

"In many ways, my life has become a seeking after the genius of places. The following excerpt from a poem by Wendell Berry offers a poignant summary of my motivations, intentions, and expectations for this program. It is about hope, rooted in a place and connected intimately to faith and to all other places."

It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old,

Because we have not made our lives to fit  
Our places, the forests are ruined, the fields eroded,  
The streams polluted, the mountains overturned. Hope  
Then to belong to your place by your own knowledge  
Of what it is that no other place is, and by  
Your caring for it as you care for no other place, this  
Place that you belong to though it is not yours,  
For it was from the beginning and will be to the end

Listen privately, silently to the voices that rise up  
From the pages of books and from your own heart.  
Be still and listen to the voices that belong  
To the streambanks and the trees and the open fields.  
There are songs and sayings that belong to this place,  
By which it speaks for itself and no other.

Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet.  
Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground  
Underfoot. Be it lighted by the light that falls  
Freely upon it after the darkness of the nights  
And the darkness of our ignorance and madness.  
Let it be lighted also by the light that is within you,  
Which is the light of imagination. By it you see  
The likeness of people in other places to yourself  
In your place. It lights invariably the need for care  
Toward other people, other creatures, in other places  
As you would ask them for care toward your place and you. (A Poem about Hope  
and Place, from his book, Leavings, Counterpoint, 2009)

As reflected in these words, this renewal program is about immersion in holy listening to God's creation and nurturing hope."

I go on to describe how the people and ministry of St. Thomas have nurtured hope in me. When I arrived here, you were already very much oriented towards creation care. Recycling and using mugs was standard operating procedure. The small Prayer Garden, making use of the steeple from the first sanctuary—now Heritage Hall, has become much more over the years, now including a Scatter Garden and a Columbarium. A small community garden begun in 2011 has grown into a significant community resource for sustainability and resilience, as well as for prayer. Prayer imbues the genius of our place to the south of our sanctuary, and in many ways it is all a Prayer Garden.

Here's a bit more of what I wrote:

“These gardens are reflections of Eden. Indeed, I want my ashes to be placed in the scatter garden where they may return to the holy soil, the humus from which they came, and where as a part of the church triumphant I may continue my presence at worship alongside the gathered community.

“With considerable work invested in these local portions of God’s creation, my heart seeks a wider view. To borrow from Berry’s poem, what are the “songs and sayings” that belong to other places? What other voices of stream, tree, and field might reveal themselves if I might “be still and listen.” What “light of imagination” of “people in other places” might illuminate remaining shadows in our own? And what new hope, both spiritual and practical, may be encountered in the mutuality of sharing “the need for care toward other people, other creatures, in other places”?”

The first principle of permaculture, a system related to creation care that Marie and I have studied, holds that we “observe and interact” in order to know a place. That is what I hope to do in places very different from Bloomington—the desert of the southwest, the temperate rainforests of the northwest, subarctic Alaska, and tropical Hawaii—all places where permaculture and ecological principles are being applied successfully.

“My hopes are similar for the congregation. Members will refocus their observing and contemplating about the place where we serve God....”

Today we begin that process with reflections about the places we each consider sacred and name “holy.” You will see at the back of the narthex a display inviting you to name your holy place or places and say something about them. This is a first step towards grasping how the holy may invite us into a new and reforming future. Post-it notes are provided.

You are also asked to bring a handful of soil from those sacred places, or perhaps nearby them, and place it in the wagon. We plan to mix that holy soil together

and then add it to the sacred soils of the Scatter Garden and the Biblical Herb Garden in the center of the St. Thomas Community Garden.

Just so you know, there are two other initiatives related to congregational renewal—also funded by the grant. Maren Claus Foley, a Master Gardener at St. Thomas, has initiated a Junior Master Gardeners Spiritual Growth Group. You will hear more about that as it is developed this summer. The other project is to develop a congregational plan related to disaster preparedness. As climate change continues to expand climate-related disasters, we want to be ready to respond well and appropriately. The grant covers the cost of several copies of highly-recommended books. We are looking for someone who is willing to gather a few members who are interested in developing a ministry plan. The hope is that we will both prevent the worst effects of climate change and adapt to those already being felt, with community service in mind.

“My expectation is that our separate reflections will be shared and shaped into useful practices for the future of mission and creation care in our place and beyond. It is my hope that these experiences and plans will serve to brighten somewhat our sadness at what we have done to God’s good creation and renew hope in a future that God may yet reveal, in part through the work of our hands.” Such a hope dovetails well with our Reformation 500 celebrations and reflections.

I close with part of Berry’s inspirational poem:

It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old,

Because we have not made our lives to fit  
Our places, the forests are ruined, the fields eroded,  
The streams polluted, the mountains overturned. Hope  
Then to belong to your place by your own knowledge  
Of what it is that no other place is, and by  
Your caring for it as you care for no other place, this  
Place that you belong to though it is not yours,  
For it was from the beginning and will be to the end

May God grant us wisdom as we seek the genius of our place. May our mission and ministry be the ground for a new Reformation. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto renewed and abundant life. Amen.