

## ***Action Jesus***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Earth Day Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
April 24, 2016  
Text: Luke 24:13-32

Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970. It began in the United States but gradually became an international celebration designed to raise awareness of the negative impact of human activity, specifically industrialization and fossil fuel supported transportation, was having on the planet earth itself. Originally a secular event, many churches and denominations, including the United Church of Christ, adopted the event as their own as an important reminder of our collective and individual responsibility to care for, be wise stewards of, God's gift of the Creation to us.

In the early years of Earth Day celebrations there was a period of disagreement among the movement's leaders as to what day exactly was the most appropriate to celebrate it. The first Earth Day was observed on March 21, the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere, but this was deemed inappropriate eventually because it emphasized the already existing divide between northern and southern hemisphere countries when the goal was to have all come together to address this enormous significantly issue. The date of April 22<sup>nd</sup> was finally identified as an acceptable date, chosen primarily because it fit well with most college calendars and college students were seen as the target

audience of this vital movement focused on the future of the planet. The focus on college students was a brilliant one as those students brought their passion for the environment with them through their life journeys. As they grew into adulthood they carried that internalized passion for the environment with them into their professional and personal lives and the impact of that passion is tangible all around us. That first generation of Earth Day celebrants was my generation and as many of us prepare for retirement we carry that passion with us still, taking heart that those who follow us are even more passionate, and more knowledgeable, than we were less than 50 years ago.

Proof of the impact of Earth Day and its significance in all our lives came to fruition this past week as the Paris Agreement on climate change was signed by 175 countries on Friday. Agreed to in Paris after a weeklong conference in 2015, this international treaty is a vitally important first step in saving this beautiful Creation God entrusted to us. The signing took place at the United Nations in New York City and it took literally all day for the representatives to make their way to the desk one at a time to sign the treaty but sign it they did. And now the rest is up to us.

As I envisioned the representatives of all those countries making their way to New York last week, I was reminded of this morning's story from the Gospel of Luke. Probably one of the most famous of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, it is

striking for several reasons. First, Jesus just shows up, joining two men walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Second, these two men were not among the 12. Only one is identified by name, Cleopas, but this tells us that many people beyond the 12 were shocked and saddened by Jesus' death and confused by news of his resurrection. Enter Jesus into the story and the conversation, literally.

Remarkably, these two men did not recognize Jesus. As he joined them, Jesus asked them to tell him what was going on that they were so sad. This is important for us to note because it is a powerful reminder that Jesus always wants us to come to him, to tell him what is heavy on our hearts. We shouldn't feel that our sadness, our worries, are not important enough or big enough to bring to Jesus. For Jesus, nothing we hold in our hearts is too small or too big to bring to him in prayer. He wants to know what is on our minds and hearts. He knows how important it is for us to speak our own truths about those things we carry with us every day, those things that weigh us down and pull us away from what matters in life. Jesus' question "what things?" is addressed to us as much as it was to Cleopas and his friend.

So they chatted as they walked along, the seven mile distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus giving the three men plenty of time for the conversation which took place over the next few hours. During this conversation, Jesus explained to the men the

significance of what happened in Jerusalem and how it was all part of God's plan, horrible as it had been. He used examples from the Hebrew Scriptures to help them understand God's big picture which they couldn't see in the midst of their sadness and grief. His words made such a difference to them that when they finally reached their destination, they insisted the stranger come and join them for a meal. Only then did they recognize Jesus in the blessing and breaking of the bread. And at that moment of recognition, he vanished leaving them to ponder all that had happened, saying to each other, "were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"

So as I think about this long ago encounter between the Risen Christ and two men journeying from one city to another, I found myself thinking about all those people journeying to New York this past week to sign the Paris Agreement of 2016. I found myself thinking about all those people all around the world traveling somewhere, doing something to address the reality that, without meaning to and without intending to, we have been slowly murdering our planet and ourselves along with it. Just like Cleopas and his friend on that long ago journey we didn't know what was really happening. We didn't really understand the negative impacts of so many aspects of our life styles that were hurting God's Creation. We didn't connect the dots ourselves so we couldn't see that corroded pipes would mean children were

being poisoned by lead. We didn't realize that greenhouse gases emitted by cars and jets and power plants could choke off the atmosphere and melt the glaciers putting coastlines around the world at risk. We didn't know that something as simple as putting fertilizer and weed killer on our lawns could put our futures at risk. Like those long ago men walking along, we didn't know what we didn't know.

So, dear friends, my question for you and for us to ponder this morning as we gather to spend time together in God's Creation as we clean up the beautiful grounds of our amazing church, is this: If Jesus showed up today and started working right alongside us, what would he say to us about God's Creation? What would he be watching for, listening for, as we talked about our plans for this church in the future? What might he suggest to us as the possibilities for us to reclaim in new ways our responsibilities as recipients of God's gift of the Creation? As Jesus walks beside us on the road into the future, what things will we bring to him as we struggle to live up to this responsibility God has given us?

Well, God has already laid on the hearts of some of us an idea about something important that we as a church are uniquely positioned to do in so many ways. You heard a little about it in Claire's message for the children this morning and you will be hearing more about it as time goes on. We are embarking on a

plan to create a Pollinator Garden right here on our beautiful grounds. Pollinator Gardens are a vital link with the future of our planet since they are designed to provide natural habitats for pollinators – bees, butterflies, bugs of all sorts as well as birds and bats. These small creatures make the entire ecosystem work through the simple act of moving from plant to plant with their little bodies covered in pollen. Pollinators are in grave danger because of pesticides, climate change and changes in the environment that have made their natural habitats ever smaller. We've already seen frightening declines in the monarch butterfly populations as well as those of honey bees and other pollinators. Dear friends, the simple truth is that if these tiny creatures treasured by God die off, so will we. Of this there is no doubt. So our church is stepping into the breach by creating a small habitat for them here.

This summer will be a time of planning and preparation for the pollinator garden since doing this the right way takes time and careful thought. We are blessed with most of the talent we need right within this church and are hopeful of identifying the rest of what we need as time goes along. It's important for you to know too that the garden we will be creating will be a demonstration garden. That means one of its primary purposes will be to teach people in the community about pollinator gardens and how to create one in their own yards. We will eventually be able to share

seeds and knowledge with our friends and neighbors, literally changing the natural habitat one yard at a time. This, we know, will bring more people into the life and ministry of this church but even more important than that, we know it's the right thing to do. It is important work. Life-saving work. Jesus work.

That's why this morning as we work outside here at the church and then later as you go through the rest of your day and your week, I hope you'll ponder the Jesus we love as more than a person in the stories of the New Testament. I hope you'll see him as more than all those drawings of a gentle man with long hair and kind eyes. I hope you will encounter Jesus yourself on your journey through life each day. I hope you will remember that Jesus was always a person of action, a person who made faith real, made God real, to the people around him by what he did as well as what he said. Action Jesus is your Jesus, and he needs you to be active too. But it's okay to start small, and there aren't too many things smaller than a bee or a bug, laden with pollen. So, what do you say? Grab that gardening gear and let's get going! Amen.