



CELEBRATING THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF LAUDATO SI': EARTH'S DISTRESS IN DIALOGUE WITH THE LUKAN ASCENSION NARRATIVES



Reflection by Veronica Lawson RSM

Our liturgical celebration of Ascension this year coincided with the fifth anniversary of the publication of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on Care of our Common Home, *Laudato Si'*. People of faith across the globe had engaged in a week of remembering and rededicating themselves to the care of the earth and of all that inhabits the earth. We have been invited to make this year a special *Laudato Si'* anniversary year.

"Everything is connected": that is the theme for the celebration of the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*. Everything is connected-witness the "digital neural network" (Jeremy Rifkin, *The Green New Deal*, St Martin's Press, 2019) that enables so many of us, in this time of pandemic, to engage in webinars and diverse means of effective communication. Even Earth's distress and the Lukan Ascension Narratives are connected, as we shall see! At least that's the hope. Earth's distress is the distress of everything and everyone in the planetary home that comes from the Mystery that is God. Earth's distress, the cry of fragile Earth and the cry of fragile people, to evoke the language of *Laudato Si'*, is compounded right now by the experience of pandemic.

Never have we been so conscious of our interconnectedness within the human community. Never have we been so conscious of our connection with other Earth beings. As evolutionary biologist Jemma Geoghegan of the University of Otago tells us, "looking at the genome of...the virus that causes COVID-19 — it is clear it has signatures that are closely related to other viruses that are present in wildlife."

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-04-09/how-did-coronavirus-start-where-did-bats-get-covid-19-from/12132312> (Accessed 1/05/20).

At the same time as we wonder about viruses crossing the species barrier, we become more and more conscious of our human need to access and to be cared for by Earth's elements, Earth's produce, Earth's beauty and Earth's life-sustaining and life-restorative properties.



We are often called upon to be Earth's stewards. The emphasis in that call is on human care for Earth. We are becoming more and more aware that Earth stewards us more than we steward Earth. Other-than-human earthkind and humankind are co-custodians: Earth cares for us with food and clothing and sustenance and healing resources and so much more-and we are to care for Earth with increasing urgency, given the destruction our kind has caused to Earth. Not only do the animals and plants care for us. We humans can learn so much from the nutritional wisdom of animals for instance. Scientists have demonstrated that animals know what their bodies need and seek it out. If you don't

believe me, then ask University of Sydney's Professor David Raubenheimer and Professor Stephen Simpson who have just published *Eat Like the Animals*, (HarperCollins, 2020).

The first reading for the feast of the Ascension, invited us to revisit the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth recounted in Luke's first volume, all that he did and taught "from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1-2). Incidentally, the gospel ends with one "ascension" story and Luke's second volume, Acts, begins with a different account of Jesus being "taken up". An irreverent friend of mine calls this the feast of the dangling feet and the iconography through the ages has reinforced this notion of a literal ascent into the heavens. The image of Jesus' ascending to heaven is grounded, or rather not grounded, in an ancient, outdated cosmogony of a three-tiered world that placed God in the heavens above, the Earth community in the planet beneath and the shades of the dead in Sheol below the earth. We must be careful not to read this story literally. It is theatre, presenting metaphorically and dramatically the great mystery of God's saving action. For the other gospel writers, Jesus' return to God and the sending of the Spirit is enacted in the immediate post-resurrection period. For Luke, Jesus returns to God after forty days and the Holy Spirit comes upon the assembled community ten days later, at Pentecost.

Luke's first volume focused on the Jesus story. The second volume will focus on the earliest community of believers in the resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit that God sent to be with them. Its first addressees are late first century Christians. We belong within a long line of its countless subsequent addressees. The ostensible addressee is Theophilus, possibly Luke's patron, who is being instructed in gospel ways. The name Theophilus means beloved of God or lover of God. Ultimately this message is for all those who love God and all whom God loves. So what do we hear that speaks to Earth's distress?



Luke refers readers back to all that Jesus did and taught. What comes to mind for me in this context are his words to the disciples: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten in God's sight?" (Luke 12:6). Ecological biblical scholar Michael Trainor comments: "God is unalterably in solidarity with these creatures as God is in perpetual communion with Earth. These sparrows, like all animals and plant life, organic and inorganic matter that constitute the planet are valued eternally by God irrespective of the disrespect and treatment they receive from humans" (About Earth's Child, 180-181). I keep thinking about this since pandemic time has become, in part, bird watching time for me. The birds in my garden are endlessly fascinating. I look at them, at their habitat and their feeding habits. I give thanks that they, like us, are in God and God is in them. I often ponder the words of Mary Tinney RSM "We care for what we love". These words have become a mantra for me. The gospel makes it abundantly clear that Jesus loved and loves Earth as God loves Earth. The Lukan Jesus was reiterating the insight of his Jewish forebears of course: God saw all that God had made and declared it good.

That takes us back to the Acts of the Apostles. After all the instruction the disciples have received, they still fail to understand. They are still living in expectation of the overthrow of Roman occupation. That is not to be. It is not the program of the Christos, the Messiah whom God has raised up to be with them through the power of the Spirit. Instead they receive a promise and a commission from their departing Christos/Messiah: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (locally), in all Judea and Samaria (regionally), and to the ends of the earth (globally)." The disciples are to bring God's word of love and care for all creation—even to the ends of the earth. In other words, they were commissioned to act "glocally" to use Jeremy Rifkin's language. We are their successors, at the ends of the earth in relation to the Lukan community. We are called to incarnate the compassion for the Earth community that Jesus showed, locally, regionally and globally. Like the earliest Christian communities, we can do this through the power of the Spirit who comes upon us all.

When Jesus leaves his disciples, they keep looking up to the heavens until they are reminded that their mission is not to keep looking up nostalgically, but to remember that he will come again-and again and again in those who lay down their lives for the sake of the whole Earth community. Sometimes we too need to be reminded not to keep looking nostalgically to the heavens or to outdated solutions to heal our troubled planet.



As part of the anniversary year, Catholic communities across the globe are asked to join a grassroots movement to work toward "total sustainability" over the next decade, "a path that would include carbon neutrality, simpler lifestyles and divestment from fossil fuels"

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/vatican-office-invites-church-journey-total-sustainability-next-decade> (Accessed 17th May, 2020).

You may like to follow this link for information on the events planned for this year. There is still time to create a renewable energy powered world and to save life on this planet, despite our failures in the past. We can do it if we heed the wisdom of the climate scientists and the proponents of a circular economy. We make of our whole lives, even retrospectively, what we opt for as our future.

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