

Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
Second Sunday of Easter [Easter Evening], April 24, 2022
Rev. Nancy M. Raabe + “Touching the Earth”

Last summer I had an interesting experience while walking our dog Jack. All of a sudden I felt the urge to lie down. I chose an open space on the dry grass and hoped no one would drive by and worry that I had collapsed or something.

I lay down on my back and immediately I began to relax. But it wasn't just a general relaxing. I felt as if the earth was taking hold of the muscles of my back and pulling me down, as if the substance of my body should reunite with the dust out of which I had been formed. I lingered as long as I dared, and then reluctantly stood up, feeling totally refreshed.



I don't think this experience had only to do with gravity, me being closer to the ground so that the Earth's magnetic field had a better grip on me than when I was upright. It was the experience of so much of my body touching the earth. Touching the earth in this way opened up for those few minutes a deeper experience of what it meant to be fully alive as a creature who shares the earth's habitation with every blade of grass.

Lying flat on your back on the earth's surface is really what the the pose of savasana ["shavasana"] is about, which typically concludes a yoga session. Cathy Farrell could tell us a lot more, but she's at another church today talking about Sanctuary Village. The Sanskrit word *savasana* actually means "corpse pose," because students practicing this pose lie face-up on the ground, arms and legs comfortably spread, eyes closed. It is one of the most difficult yoga poses to do well--harder than tree, or porpoise, or deer (which someone in our class this week said should be renamed "roadkill")--difficult, I imagine, because we resist giving our body over to the earth. We would rather be in full control.

We just heard Luke's marvelous account of the events of Easter evening, when Jesus appeared to two of his followers who were returning home from the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. It was not just any Passover, of course--astounding events beyond their comprehension had taken place, but they did not know what to make of them.

There are many aspects of this account that we could hone in on, but to me the biggest question is: What finally opened their eyes to see that it was Jesus among them?

As I read this, it was when Jesus took hold of a loaf of bread--when he touched that daily staple that is as close to earth as one can get. Wheat. Water. Salt. Yeast. Basic substances. Of course we are talking about French bread--the only bread, to Julia Child. We can almost hear Julia saying: "A loaf of properly made French bread closely resembles the earth: The crust hard and pitted, as if by continents and oceans, the inside softer but still solid in its way." Bread, the food that cries "life" more than any other. Jesus touched bread, and the disciples saw.

The risen Jesus was not a vision or a ghost. With his flesh-and-blood hands, he took bread and tore it apart. He touched the earth and shared the fruits of that touch with the two disciples. Their eyes were opened and in that instant they knew who he was. When he vanished they hurried back to Jerusalem and told the others that Jesus he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Touching the earth is also a deeply revered Buddhist practice. In one of Buddhism's iconic images, Gautama Buddha sits in meditation with his left palm upright on his lap, while his right hand touches the earth. Why? Because demonic forces led by their demon king Mara have tried to unseat him from his place under the bodhi tree, or the tree of enlightenment. Mara demands he confirm his spiritual awakening, and the Buddha responds simply by touching the earth, to which the earth responds: "I am your witness." Mara and armies vanish and the morning star appears in the sky. This moment, affirmed by touching the earth, is the central experience from which entire Buddhist tradition unfolds.

"Touching the Earth" was also a central practice of Thích Nhất Hạnh, who died in January at age 95. Known as the "father of mindfulness," he was a major influence on Western practices of Buddhism and developed guided meditations that involved bowing low and placing one's forehead on the ground to make as much contact with the earth as possible. A few years ago he explained, "When we touch the earth we take refuge in it. We receive its solid and inclusive energy. The earth embraces us and helps us transform our ignorance, suffering, and despair. Wherever we are, we can bow down to receive its energy of stability and fearlessness."

There is much this practice has to teach us. As we wrestle against the dehumanization of the electronic age, where even putting pen to paper is becoming a rare practice, we must deliberately seek out ways to reconnect our bodies with the cosmos that gave us birth.

Jesus' resurrection is all about the body, molecules and atoms, the stuff of the earth reconstituted. He rose in a flesh and blood body, yet one with new properties. The risen Jesus was hungry. He ate broiled fish with the disciples. Yet somehow matter was not an impediment to movement. He could vanish suddenly and appear just as suddenly in rooms where all the doors were locked. His body bore the marks of crucifixion and yet he was whole.

The same will be true of us. We too will have resurrected bodies. When and how, and what they will look like, only God knows. But because Christ was raised, so shall we be too, for this is the promise that frees us. This is the reality that allows us to look death in the face and laugh, because the devil can no longer use our fear of death to tempt us to do his bidding

So let us develop the practice of touching the earth whenever possible, because in so doing so we are reconnecting ourselves with this God-given planet to which we literally owe our lives. Till the soil. Plant a tree. Grow a garden. In all things, exercise gratitude and humility. Happy Earth Day! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Amen.