

s-Ea2C-07-Touching On the Truth  
Earth Day Sunday  
Ps. 148 *Praise the Lord from the Earth*  
John 20:19-31 *'Doubting' Thomas*  
Fremont Congregational  
22 April 2007 (not lection date)

## TOUCHING ON THE TRUTH

Well, it's official. Governor Schwarzenegger says that being green is "sexy." He should know, I guess. We won't go there except to point out that when he used to say, "Mine are bigger than yours," he was talking about his biceps, not his cars.

When it comes to environmentalist politicians, I'll take what I can get these days, even if it means I have to swallow a little dose of hypocrisy.

Fact is, we all have things we're willing to reason about and things that you'll have to claw loose from our cold, dead fingers. I figure that if everyone—and I do mean everyone—at least begins to take this whole global warming and planet poisoning thing seriously, then we have made strides. Too little, too late, perhaps; but strides nonetheless.

I was reading author Bill McKibben's recent article entitled "Warning on Warming." McKibben is something of an environmental celebrity these days. He's also an old high school buddy of Jeff Spencer's—Jeff's the pastor over at Niles UCC—and a veritable voice of reason on the subject of global warming.

Bill says in this article from the New York Review of Books that global warming has moved from rough hypothesis to immanent danger. It isn't fresh news any more; in fact it is field of scientific study that has legs longer than people who are already old enough to vote.

Although ecology and environmentalism have been around as social and scientific concepts a lot longer, global warming per se first emerged as an issue in the public eye around 1988. James Hansen, a scientist with NASA, reported to congress that he and a handful of other scientists were seeing a definite trend toward warmer atmospheric temperatures. They hypothesized, not without good reason and good data, that this upsurge was aggravated, if not downright caused, by humans dumping the air full of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels. This is when the bad stuff, shall we say, hit the fan.

Here in the United States, we had already been told—back in the 70's—that fossil fuel sources were finite and that our reliance on oil from the Middle East was a political bomb waiting to go off. I have a very vivid memory of the first

Earth Day and a speech that announced that we had exactly 20 years of oil left in the planet at our current rate of consumption.

Well, that prediction was conservative, as it turns out, but perhaps not by as much as we would like to think. The question we face right now seems to be, will we run out of oil first or will we just kill ourselves using up what is left as fast as we can?

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We people of the modern world put so much faith in science. When a new medical treatment or life-saving drug comes out we rush to give it a try, assuming that *new* science is always *good* science. And that's true often enough to keep us coming back for more. We love our technology—teeny little computers, cell phones that plug into our heads, satellites that bring us instant information about who's got a hangnail this week.

We love it and we trust it—and sometimes our trust is misplaced. But all in all, we love our toys and even though they're changing our world we wouldn't take one step back.

Yes, we love scientific advances in medicine and communication and information technology. So why do we drag our feet so hard when it comes to other scientific advances, the advances in atmospheric data collection and interpretation, advances in geology and ice core studies, deep water research, botany, biology and genetics?

As Thomas said to the other disciples, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

I think there are things that we don't believe simply because we don't want to believe them.

I was talking with our Associate Conference Minister, Drew Nettinga, on Thursday at a Congregations Organizing for Renewal clergy lunch. We were discussing Easter sermons, and Drew remarked that he loves the way the Gospel of Mark ends: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

I was surprised, since most folks find this blunt ending disturbing and unsatisfying. I asked Drew why he liked it so much. "I think Mark left the ending off on purpose," Drew said. "Because we're supposed to go out and finish the story ourselves."

It would've been easy, wouldn't it, if Jesus had died and had stayed dead. Then all the disciples could've said, "Well, we did our best, but we failed. The only

thing to do now is to go home.” And then they could’ve gone back to fishing or tax collecting or whatever they were doing before this strange man came along and invited them to follow him. Failure is convenient, sometimes. Disbelief can be convenient, too.

Thomas demanded hard evidence. Not hearsay, not reported information, not second-hand news. Hard evidence. He wanted to see the blood for himself, put his finger right into the hole. He wanted evidence, not that Jesus was alive, *but that he truly had died!*

And that’s where we put ourselves when we keep postponing doing something about the changes in the atmosphere and climate of the one planet in our solar system that can sustain life—our beautiful, God-given Earth.

Bill McKibben’s article states that by 1995—twelve years ago!—the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had completed its studies, and concluded that the lethal combination of world population growth and people’s increasing appetite for fuel were damaging the earth’s basic systems, particularly the delicate balance of incoming and outgoing solar energy. In the years since that report came out, the findings of the Panel have been supported again and again by subsequent research.

Slowly, the public has been made aware. More slowly, some good changes have been put into place. Excruciatingly slowly, we are beginning to have positive thoughts about improving our fuel consumption and thereby decreasing our carbon load on the atmosphere. But some unpleasant surprises are lurking out there.

Number one surprise: the problem is growing exponentially. It is speeding up and the rate of change is faster than we are responding. This is all going to happen, not in our grandchildren’s lifetime, not in our children’s lifetime, but in OUR lifetime.

Number two surprise: we’d be even worse off right now, temperature-wise, except that all the soot and smog we produce is giving us a little shade. That’s catch-22 for you! And there is a time lag between carbon emissions and their effect on air temperature. What we do today to pollute the planet will come back to bite us decades from now. And what we do today to improve things will take a very long time to become evident. We don’t get to put our fingers right into the wounds. We have to act in faith—right now—for the sake of future generations.

Number three surprise: when the weather patterns start changing worldwide, then some places are going to have more rain while others become deserts. So we’ll see more flooding as well as dust storms and drought—just not in the same parts of the country. Right now, almost everything frozen on earth is

melting, and it's melting fast. And we still don't really know the full extent that our world relies on the ice caps. The newest research indicates that sea level rises are going to be worse than first thought.

Number four surprise: it is possible to kill the oceans. It is possible and it is probable and it is perhaps the worst crisis that we face. It is also the most salvageable situation, but time is short.

The IPCC warns that we may see temperature increases of up to five degrees Fahrenheit during this century. That is enough to produce what James Hansen has called a "totally different planet."

Imagine, if you can, Hurricane Katrina—every year. Malaria and other tropical diseases becoming endemic in the North. Refugees from rising waters and expanding deserts pouring into the remaining livable portions of the world. Trying to feed these people when much arable land has become useless and heat waves destroy crops. It really does look like the biblical plagues: drought, famine, flood, insects, disease.

Except God has not sent these plagues upon us. No, we've been able to do it to ourselves.

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Jesus told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That's important. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were few. The rest of us have had to rely on second-hand reports. Do we need incontrovertible evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? If so, we're not going to get it.

On the other hand, think about the things we supposedly DO believe, based on facts and figures. How many of us have actually, personally, SEEN a chick emerge from an egg? And how many have had Einstein's theory of relativity explained so that we really understand it?

Truth isn't always what we can touch. And faith isn't only believing—it's acting on that belief. Environmentalism is just *good stewardship*—and any good steward will tighten up the routine when necessary.

The global climate change is the most important issue in the world today. I firmly believe that all people of religious faith and good will are being called to learn as much as they can, do as much as they can, and cooperate world-wide to make the sweeping changes that are urgently needed if we are to survive into the next half-century.

I am not calling for us all to sit in dark, freezing houses and eat raw oatmeal. We all have things we truly need and other things we could just as well do without. Each of us must discover which is which—and what we can reasonably and sensibly change in our lives and in our society.

Jesus expected his disciples to go out in faith—without having incontrovertible proof—and take the good news to every corner of the earth. That was the biblical gospel, the Word of God that speaks to us in holy scripture and in loving Christian service. But now there is one more gospel, the gospel of the interdependence of creation, God’s Word of life and resurrection. That gospel is also our responsibility, and it should be our joy as well. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Just as you led your people out of the bondage of Egypt and into the wilderness where they learned a new faith and a new way to live, lead us, O great God, out of the bondage of our ways of the past and into a creative, sustainable future where all of your children can live in harmony and simple prosperity. We pledge ourselves to do this work to the best of our ability, and to sacrifice as we must, for the sake of the whole world and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Resources:

McKibben, Bill, “Warning on Warming,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 54, No. 4, March 15, 2007.