

The following sermon was preached by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas at All Saints Parish, Brookline, on May 20, 2001, the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 14:14-18 Ps 67 Rev 21:22-22:5 John 14:23-29

What I Learned in Jail

This will be a very personal homily. I want to talk about my arrest last week in Washington, D.C.

It is fitting that today is Rogation Day, one of the days set aside in early summer for praying for the harvest and for God's blessing on the natural world. I have to confess that in years past, I used to look at these days of prayer, and such activities as this morning's blessing of the flower gardens, as being rather quaint, a sentimental, misty-eyed throwback to our agrarian past. I used to imagine that we'd outgrown all that, living as we do in this modern, electronic age in which most people live in cities and never set foot on a farm.

Today I look back on my supposedly sophisticated point of view as completely naive. The environmental crisis has made all of us acutely aware of our dependence on clear air and healthy soil, and our interdependence with all living beings. Such issues as global climate change and extinction of species confront us with the urgency of praying not only for the harvest, but also for a new, more respectful relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world.

During Holy Week, as I followed Christ through his vigil, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, I felt a clear invitation to join Religious Witness for the Earth for three days of lobbying and prayer in Washington, D.C. As I prayed with the image of the stone blocking the tomb in which Christ was buried, I asked God, What is the stone that blocks the tomb? What is the stone that holds us back from fullness of life? At first I could think of no stone. But then I saw something looming in front of me, something massive and weighty, much too big to deal with. I recognized it with a sinking heart. It was the stone of the environmental crisis.

I've done enough reading, seen enough clear-cut forests, heard enough about global climate change and the extinction of species, to sense the enormity of the problem. *The earth is the Lord's*, said the psalmist, but you'd never know that from the way we're devouring it, acre by acre.

And it wasn't just the ecological crisis that lay upon me like a stone. It was my own despair. What could I possibly do about protecting the earth? What could any of us do? Maybe it was too late to do anything. I saw in my prayer that if I wanted to bear witness to the Christ who bursts out of the tomb – if I wanted to bear witness to the Christ who proclaims that life, not death, has the last word and who gives us power to roll away the stone – then I needed to take a stand. I needed to go to Washington.

Religious Witness for the Earth is a network of clergy and laity of various religious traditions who are convinced that the environmental crisis is not just a scientific, political, or economic issue but one that is also profoundly moral and spiritual. In fact, it can be argued that the environmental crisis is *the* great moral and spiritual issue of our time. The basic concern of Religious Witness for the Earth is the problem of global climate change, and the group is focussing first on protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil drilling.

On our first day in D.C. we were briefed on the issue; on the second day, we lobbied on Capitol Hill; on the third day a group of about 150 of us gathered a few blocks from the Department of Energy. Clergy and rabbis vested in the regalia of their respective traditions, and we began to march in a colorful procession. Some of us held hand-lettered signs that read “Dominion Is Not Destruction” and “Environmental Justice.”

The Department of Energy is a big, looming structure made of stone, and in the shadow of its overhang, we gathered to sing and pray. We asked God’s forgiveness of our own complicity in excessive consumption, waste, and pollution. We prayed with thanksgiving for the beauty of creation, and with sorrow for the ways we are destroying it. We prayed for policies that respect the sacredness of the earth.

As for what happened next, I’d like to single out three scenes.

(1) At the end of the worship service, everyone sang “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true, and with thanksgiving, I’ll be a living sanctuary for you.” As we sang, the 22 of us who had decided to participate in an act of non-violent civil disobedience slowly walked the twenty feet to the doors of the Department of Energy, and knelt or stood in prayer.

I was wearing my alb and stole – I was dressed for the Eucharist. When I wear these vestments, I usually feel peaceful, but on that morning I was also feeling vigilant and alert. I was amazed by the level of resistance and hostility that we faced. Close by were four police vans, half-a-dozen cruisers, and some 40 police, including two officers on bicycles and two on motorcycles. Police photographers stood in doorways, on benches – even, for all I know, on the rooftops nearby – taking pictures of us from every angle. I don’t know what they were expecting. A riot? An angry crowd of thousands? It seemed so poignant to me – here was this tiny band of non-violent religious activists confronting such organized and overwhelming power. I thought of the protester in Tianamen Square, standing alone in front of a tank.

As I knelt in prayer at the entrance to the building, I felt the only power that was ours to wield, the power of self-offering. I felt the power of being able to say, “This is where I stand. This is what I value. This is something for which I am willing to put my life on the line. This is my body, given for you.”

When it comes to caring about the earth, I usually don’t let myself be that whole-hearted. Usually I hold back. Usually I don’t want to be aware of the ways we are destroying our planet, because I don’t want to feel the pain of my grief and anger. But that morning I let myself feel it all. I let myself admit how much I *do* care, how *passionately* I care. And I was willing to offer myself, to express my passion in a gesture of self-offering.

There is a joy that comes in such complete self-offering. I think the early apostles tasted that joy. In their effort to bear witness to God, they were sometimes persecuted, sometimes encouraged, and sometimes – to their horror, as in today’s reading – greeted as gods. But wherever they went, they offered themselves for the Gospel and bore witness to what they knew.

(2) One by one we were handcuffed and led into a police van. Some of you may know that a van is like a big steel box with no windows except a small grated opening on the door. I was placed in a van with seven other women. We sat down, facing each other on two metal benches, our hands cuffed behind our backs. A police officer lowered a metal bar over our heads and locked it across our chests. A second metal bar secured our ankles. We were locked in tight. And then the door slammed shut.

My first reaction was the quiet, prayerful certainty that I was exactly where I needed to be. My second reaction was not so pleasant. I was fine as long we were driving somewhere – I had a sense that we were getting somewhere, that there was movement or progress. But as we found out later, it took a while for the Federal Protective Service to find a jail that would receive us. So after we were booked, we ended up spending a long time in that parked van with the door closed.

I didn't know it until then, but I am subject to claustrophobia. The longer we waited in that closed space, the more I began to feel a mounting sense of panic. *They've forgotten about us. We're going to be in here forever. I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here RIGHT NOW.* I knew that this feeling was irrational, but it was as if some ancient part of my brain was rising up and flooding my capacity to reason.

During our training in non-violent civil disobedience the night before, Andrea, one of our leaders, had told us that fear can come in waves. At any moment, one of us might be feeling weak while another person was feeling strong. She coached us, in moments of weakness, to take the hands of someone close by, to look the person in the eye and to say, "Tell me that everything is going to be alright. Give me some of your strength. Pass on some of your strength to me."

As it happens, I was sitting beside Andrea, blessed Andrea. As I sat there in silence, secretly fighting off panic, she happened to turn to me and ask, "Where is your church?"

Where is my church? I thought desperately to myself. *WHAT church? I don't know where it is. It's far away. I'm supposed to be a living sanctuary but my church is gone. There IS no church. I have to get out of here.*

"I'm feeling a little dizzy," I told her.

Andrea looked at me closely. "Are you frightened?" she asked me. "Look at me. Look me in the eyes. I know you feel cramped in this small space. But everything will be fine. You can get through this."

She later told me that she could see me spiraling down. She couldn't talk me out the panic, but she could be an advocate for me. The next time the guard opened the van door, Andrea leaned forward and announced firmly that Margaret needed some fresh air.

The guard had mercy on me, took my elbow and led me outside. I don't know when I have ever experienced so deeply the sweetness of wind and sky and open space. It took a while for my shaking to subside. As I calmed down, the whole situation began to feel a little surreal, what with me sitting quietly on a lawn chair beside a police van in a parking lot, still wearing my alb and stole, my hands cuffed behind my back.

What did I learn from all this? Humility. I had to give up any fantasy that I could handle these challenges alone. I had to admit that I needed help. Like the disciples in the Book of Acts, I needed the support of a community. I needed to give up any proud attempt to be self-sufficient. We need each other, as we bear witness to the Gospel. None of us has to do this alone.

(3) At the end of the day we were taken to an ancient DC jail named Central Cell Block. The corridor lined with cells was painted a sickly green. The heavy, barred doors slid open and shut with a clang. Each tiny cell contained two bunks, consisting of plain metal shelves. There was no pillow, no mattress, and no window, nothing else but a toilet.

It was the low point of the day. We were hungry and thirsty and tired. We had no idea how long we would be there, nor why we were still in custody. We had paid our \$50 fine at 3 p.m., and by now it was 9:00 p.m. Were we being harassed, or was this simply the slow grinding of bureaucracy? One by one we were taken out of the cells, fingerprinted and photographed. The guards looking after us were grim. We might get out that night, and then again, we might not. Andrea whispered to us not to mention the word “lawyer” – if the guard heard us, we might be in there for two or three days.

Late that night a guard finally brought us our first meal since the arrest: bologna sandwiches wrapped in cellophane, donuts, and Koolaid. As it happens, I am a vegetarian and I can’t eat sugar, so this was something of a challenge. I asked a second guard for a glass of water, and she kindly brought me one. Now I had something to drink. I peeled the bread off the bologna. Now I had something to eat.

Well, I thought, I guess the food is appropriate for jail: bread and water.

“Watch out,” Kate called from the opposite cell. “The bread’s moldy.”

I looked down at my slice of bread and my cup of water. Pretty poor stuff. But for some graced reason I didn’t feel deprived. I thought of the Eucharist. I remembered how Christ gives himself to us in the bread and the wine. I took a bite of the moldy bread and I ate it with reverence, very slowly. I took a sip of the water. And as I slowly consumed the bread and water, to my astonishment all my anxiety slipped away. I was suddenly at peace. I knew that I was free. It didn’t matter that I was still in jail. It didn’t matter that I had no idea when I would get out. It didn’t matter that I was behind bars. None of that mattered, because I was already free. Nothing could take that away. No matter what the outward conditions, I was free. As I looked around that little cell, I was filled with happiness. With my cellmate, I began quietly to sing some hymns. And I was singing with joy.

Looking back on it now, I think I had a taste of what Paul experienced when he spoke of “the peace that passes understanding.” In today’s gospel, the risen Christ prepares to leave his disciples, promises to send them the Holy Spirit, and then he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives” – for the peace of this world depends on one’s outer circumstances. The peace of Christ is always available, whatever may be happening and wherever we may be. When we touch that inner peace, we know that we are free. And so, Jesus tells us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

In all, I spent 12 hours in custody. When I got home, I re-read Philippians, that amazing epistle that Paul wrote from prison. It is a letter written by a man who is free. “I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” says Paul. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” [Philippians 4:11-13].

That is what my jail cell taught me. That is what I was given to see.

Today in the Eucharist we all have a chance to offer ourselves to God. It may not feel as decisive a moment as if we were kneeling in prayer in front of the Department of Energy, but in fact it is. In the Eucharist we offer to God everything that is in us – our doubts and fears, our hopes and convictions. We offer everything that is in us, our whole selves, to God.

We come to the Eucharist with humility, acknowledging our frailty and our need for one another.

And we come to the Eucharist knowing that Christ is offering himself to us, and that in the gift of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, we are receiving everything that we need. It doesn't matter in what way we may feel trapped or imprisoned – Christ is giving himself to us fully, and in receiving that gift, we are free. Christ is feeding us and sustaining us for whatever struggles for justice might lie ahead.

May Christ's love bear fruit in us, so that we too may be part of the fruitful harvest for which we pray.