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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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7 Easter, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 1:15-17, 21-26](#)

[1 John 5:9-13](#)

[John 17:6-19](#)

[Psalm 1](#)

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What's the difference between the earth and the world?

For me, the difference is the Golden Gate Bridge.

Let me explain.

You see, scripture has a way of using these two words. They mean almost the same thing, but not quite; or the same thing, seen through different lenses.

The earth is the planet earth: dirt, rocks, the whole terrestrial ball, along with all its living things. It's something physical and biological, systems of geology and life all interlocking and working together. Human beings are part of the earth along with all the other plants and animals. The earth is good. It's God's good creation. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it."

And then there's the world. The world is the planet earth seen through the lens of all the economic and political and moral and spiritual relationships and systems that govern our lives. The world is the realm of human activity, commerce and trade and politics, projects and undertakings, courage and cowardice, generosity and greed. The world is also good, in the sense that God created it—but it's complicated, because the world is in thrall to a lot of evil too. The world is a mixed-up place. And yet God's plan for the world is to put all that evil to right.

It's been said that the Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city. In the book of Genesis humans live in an unspoiled realm of nature. They live on the earth. A world hasn't been built yet. In the book of Revelation that ends the Bible, we have a vision of a holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to the earth. We have a vision of human civilization as it should be: taking the earth and building something that makes it even more beautiful, even more perfect. Human beings as a gift to nature rather than a danger to it. That's what the world is supposed to be.

Which brings me to the Golden Gate Bridge. Here's one of the most beautiful straits on all of planet Earth: the Golden Gate, this ribbon of water between San Francisco and the Marin Headlands. Eighty years ago human beings decided to build a bridge across it. And your opinions may vary. But for me, this particular graceful, arching suspension bridge with its particular orangeish color fits in with its surroundings so harmoniously that it actually makes the Golden Gate more beautiful rather than less. Which is so rare with things built by human beings. And that, for me, has always been an icon of what the world could be, should be.

Now in reality nothing is so simple. We know that the Golden Gate Bridge is more than a decoration. There's a lot of money and power tied up in that bridge, commerce and travel that can enable great good and also great exploitation. There's a lot of pollution tied up in that bridge, car exhaust that's contributing directly to the droughts and wildfires that threaten us and the climate change that threatens our neighbors all over the world. And on a human level that bridge sees both joy and tragedy: Wedding proposals. Marathons. Protests. Suicides—enough of those that a barrier is being built to prevent them. So it's not enough to just say, Oh, the Golden Gate Bridge, humanity at harmony with its environment, the world and the earth coming together as one! Because it's complicated. In Christian theological terms, we live in a world that is beautiful and beloved, but also fallen, subject to sin and evil and death.

Today we also heard part of Jesus' great prayer for his disciples from the Gospel of John's story of the Last Supper. He is about to leave them, he says, to go to the Father. And he prays that God the Father will keep them safe from the world, even as they are in the world. He's fulfilled his mission in the world, but they will remain. "I don't pray for you to take them out of the world," he says, "but to protect them in the world, to protect them from the evil one."

We might like to be taken out of the world sometimes. It's a dangerous and tragic world. A world of rockets and bombs in Israel and Palestine, of wars in Ethiopia and Yemen and Afghanistan, massacres of civilians in Burma, democracy under siege all over the world and here at home, of droughts and wildfires, of a pandemic that has killed millions and continues to rage in many places. We might like to demonize the world, to say it is all bad, to say we are citizens of heaven so what does the world matter? But that's not what Jesus says.

For Jesus the world is not to be rejected, but to be redeemed. After all, probably the most famous words in all John's gospel are, "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

Sometimes people think Christian faith is otherworldly. Actually there's nothing that should be more this-worldly. Because God's dream isn't about the end of the world, or escaping from the world. It's about the world in all its complexity coming to be as beautiful and perfect as God has had in mind from the beginning: with relationships and systems that are just and joyful and life-giving, with power shared gracefully and used for the good of all, with enemies converted into siblings and all of it joined together in a song of never-ending praise. It's about not just the Golden Gate Bridge but everything about our society making the earth not less beautiful but more so, more healthy, more joyful, more alive. Now that dream isn't complete yet, and so it's still complicated. We exist in the messy middle, in a world where Jesus is praying for us, and God is at work all around us, if we have the grace to notice it.

Today is the Seventh Sunday in Easter, the Sunday that sits in a special kind of in-between time between the Feast of the Ascension last Thursday and the Feast of Pentecost next Sunday. It's a time of waiting, when we remember the disciples of Jesus waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit, waiting to be sent out on a mission that would transform the world. And it's an in-between time for us as well, here on our last Sunday of all-Zoom church, poised to gather back together in person next week at Pentecost. This week, may we find God at work in the messy middle. And may the Spirit guide us to all those places where we are called to join in with God's healing and transformation of the world.