

What Cry Can Bring A Healing?^{*} Christian Resurrection in the Work of Thomas Berry

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Introduction

When Thomas Berry writes about what he thinks will happen in the future after we die, he often simply states that he believes we will continue to be part of the universe, embedded in the cosmos. This is a rather vague answer to such a fundamental human question. Although a Christian, he rarely mentions resurrection, and instead appeals to remaining related within the great web of life. Many argue, with some support from Berry, that religion, Christianity in particular, is an “old” and outdated way of thinking with limited relevance to life today, which is operating out of a new science-based cosmology. I believe, however, that religion, and for the purposes of this paper, Christianity, has something to say that uniquely contributes to addressing questions of what happens after we die precisely because we Christians believe in a resurrection after death, like that of Jesus, where we will be transformed and reach final fulfillment with all beings.

In this paper, I seek to explore the little that Thomas Berry writes on Christian resurrection specifically, and how it applies to a future

* The question is raised in Thomas Berry, “Morningside Cathedral,” line 11 (International Community for Ecopsychology, 1983), accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/gatherings3/berry.html>:

But now, darkness deeper than even God
Can reach with a quick healing power
What sound,
What song,
What cry appropriate
What cry can bring a healing?

resurrection and fulfillment for Earth that acknowledges our broken and disordered reality, while looking into the future in expectation of glorified transformation. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how traditional Christian resurrection can be applied to the material world for the sake of seeking justice, valuing the physical world, and reconciling the anthropocentrism that dictates our world, in anticipation of an eschatological new heaven and new Earth.

Thomas Berry on the Resurrection

All Berry writes about the new cosmology as it relates to Christian resurrection, using the word “resurrection” specifically, can be found in one paragraph in his book, *Befriending the Earth*, where he speaks to “The Question of Evil.”¹

My paraphrase of what Berry writes there is that we human beings have the capacity to respond creatively when confronted with any form of suffering. In Christianity this creative response is captured in the idea of the resurrection, the ultimate word of life over death. Resurrection—that transformed, complete, and final fulfillment of reality—offers us a way to view the world. The human capacity for destruction, however, is also at play, cutting short the natural life processes of various species for selfish gain. It is no longer acceptable to believe we can destroy the planet and that everything, our existence, will still be okay in the end because God will gloriously transform all in the fullness of the resurrection. We must care for our planet now and work for life for all beings, because this has both temporal and eternal consequences. Berry asserts that any destruction we impose in this life on Earth will be imposed forever, even in the resurrection. In this way, what we are changing in the makeup of creatures and ecosystems now not only has negative effects here for our lives on Earth, but for our lives, our Earth, for all time.²

Berry makes this claim that we must care for Earth now and

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1. Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation*, eds. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 82.
 2. *Ibid.*

that we must not wait for a future where everything works itself out in the end by appealing to divine immanence, theosis, agency, and moments of transformation present in creation. He first appeals to divine immanence, the belief that God is intimately present in all of creation from the very beginning of time. As Creator of all, God knows us well and is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. This divine presence is expressed by creatures in every mode of existence, though differentiated, thus reflecting the multiplicity and goodness of God. If God were not present in creation, nothing could exist because it is the divine spark of life, the divine being in me, that makes me who and what I am. This mystery in the depths of my being helps me to know what I am here for, and, when I can recognize this sacred mystery in other creatures, I become a witness to the divine presence of God, the Creator who can be known throughout Earth.³ Therefore, when we destroy something of creation, we extinguish an expression of the immanence of God in the world.

Related to divine immanence, Berry makes use of theosis, or divinization, which acknowledges that God's presence in the world makes the world holy, as God is the power that infuses all things with life. Destroying any expression of the immanence of God in the world through our destructive habits means we also destroy the sacramentality or holiness the world gains by being loved by God and by God being at work in the world. God, the originating power, brings forth and draws out the universe by freely sending cosmic and creative energy as a gift, which results in the existence of creation. Because God is one and not many, this initial energy is also one, and all creatures share in this one energy. Berry writes, "If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time."⁴ Viewing the universe in this way, it appears that nothing is separate from other creatures or from that original energy. This coming-in-to-being power of the universe becomes the foundation, the web of relationships that enables life to exist at all, and

3. Ibid., 19.

4. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 17.

continues to be present in the actualization of every single moment of grace, of transformation in the universe story.

Operating out of this graced existence, originating with the creative energy of God infused in an intimate way throughout the universe, Berry understands all created beings as having their own personal agency. In the matrix of relationships, Berry understands each creature as having the capacity to act for itself, and the universe as having the capacity to act on its own as well. The universe is not stagnant; rather it is a dynamic collaboration of various bodies acting together for the sake of realizing their own creative energies, separately and together.⁵ Thus the activities of the universe in their multiplicity and singularity become an expression also of the one initial primordial universe activity, resulting in a diversity of life forms acting upon each other. When seen this way, the universe cannot be simply a “thing,” but rather an animate being expressing many modes of life that all work together for the symbiotic whole. This agency of the universe is being disregarded, however, for the sake of perpetuating the belief that human agency is the pinnacle of all knowing and becoming in Earth’s life. Conflating our superior intelligence among all species with that of the Supreme Being, we humans exert our power, our creativity, and our technology over the rest of creation for the sake of trying to control Earth. We attempt to perpetuate our species at the expense of all others while satisfying the insatiable appetite of our greed. We know, however, that we cannot actually exist this way, because we need each other for the sake of ensuring our survival, both now and into the future.

Berry advocates for care of Earth now out of a vision of relationship where we recognize the processes of transformation at work in the world. Billions of years ago Earth itself was born out of the vast universe processes of life and death, generating living beings to inhabit the land and sea, and setting the stage for the evolutionary processes required for human beings to emerge. Earth’s history is ripe with mystery, with brilliance, and with wonder as life forms have grown to greater complexity and diversity, making the world more beautiful.

Drawing upon the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Berry

5. *Ibid.*, 71-75.

understands the universe as constantly undergoing a series of transformations, driving creation forward to greater complexity and consciousness and ultimately being drawn forth toward total fulfillment in the Christic image of the Omega Point.⁶ All creation is centered upon this one point, and all things move together toward the Omega Point, so that they converge with each other in vast and deep layers that also look ahead to their ultimate point, the Omega, which will bind and encompass all beings in union.⁷

When viewed as a process of increasing complexity toward fulfillment, the presence of human beings on Earth too becomes simply one moment of transformation in a whole series of transformations leading up to that point of convergence and richness. Teilhard writes,

In the same beam of light the instinctive gropings of the first cell link up with the learned gropings of our laboratories.... The passing wave that we can feel was not formed in ourselves. It comes to us from far away; it set out at the same time as the light from the first stars. It reaches us after creating everything on the way.... Man alone constitutes the last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all the successive layers of life.⁸

As the freshest and most complicated layer of life, humans are deeply embedded within the ongoing development of the universe, from the self-organization of the very first cells to human self-reflective consciousness. In this way, humans find within ourselves the very macrocosm from which we come into existence, and this human microcosmic reflection carries within it the potential for interior transformation, the capacity for creativity, and the ability to respond to change and challenge. In this way the human story is the

6. While Berry does not write of the Omega Point, he embraces de Chardin as having written the “basic work of the twentieth century theology” and “possibly, the most powerful restatement of Christianity since the time of St. Paul.” *Ibid.*, 23. Berry outlines de Chardin’s contributions at *ibid.*, 23–25. For de Chardin’s vision, see Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 254–272.

7. *Ibid.*, 259.

8. *Ibid.*, 224

universe story, part of the symbiotic whole that constantly reaches out and works in tandem with the rest of creation for the sake of creating and sustaining life.

The Christian story also participates in the universe story, with the belief that God is uniquely and intimately present in created reality through the act of creating and imbuing all beings with life, thereby allowing them to participate in divine life. God is both the centre from which emerges the foundation of life and the force toward which all beings are moving. In the life that comes from our very cells and the elemental universe that sustains all existence, we encounter not simply God's goodness but the actual, living presence of God who anchors us to each other in harmonious union.⁹

God's incarnation in the person of Jesus, then, is simply another moment of transformation, though an important moment in the history of Earth, where God reveals Godself, present to Earth in a different way than previously experienced.

The prodigious expanses of time which preceded the first Christmas were not empty of Christ: they were imbued with the influx of his power.... All these preparatory processes were cosmically and biologically necessary that Christ might set foot upon our human stage. And all this labour was set in motion by the active, creative awakening of his soul inasmuch as that human soul had been chosen to breathe life into the universe. When Christ first appeared before men [sic] in the arms of Mary he had already stirred up the world.¹⁰

Jesus, like the rest of humanity, contains within himself the microcosm of the expansive and complex universe; yet because of his hypostasis unites what is seemingly disparate: temporality and eternity. By incorporating all beings into himself—the personal, the universal, every element, every creature—he makes a place for us in his very being and is the cosmic image of the magnetic centre toward which the entire universe is oriented.

9. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Simon Bartholomew (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 84-85.

10 *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Resurrection in the Paschal Mystery

Drawing on Berry we must take into consideration divine immanence, the divinization of creation, the agency of creatures, and the series of transformations that contribute to the universe and the flourishing of life as we discuss Christian resurrection in relationship to cosmogenesis. Moving away from the notion that the universe is a once-and-for-all-time created space allows the universe to be a dynamic agent, a subject active in its own becoming whose own natural processes are part of the ongoing transformation of Earth. Humans cut short these processes in the name of advancement and achievement and the perpetual quest for “more.” What was left to our care and responsibility, Earth, is now at our mercy for its very existence and for the sake of ensuring its survival. This has serious ongoing consequences, as Berry points out, ranging from the temporal damage we inflict to what Berry suggests will also be eternal damage. Everything is not going to be okay.¹¹

What does Berry mean, while discussing resurrection, when he says the destruction imposed on Earth now will be imposed forever, thereby having eternal significance? For this, I appeal to Berry’s background in Christianity and look to the paradigmatic figure, Jesus of Nazareth, as a way to understand how the resurrection can include temporal damage that remains eternal. An understanding of incarnation that I share with Berry is that of Jesus as God working within creation for the sake of helping to transform the world through relationships. Where I find Berry lacking, however, is in his treatment of the incarnation of Jesus as it relates to the entirety of the Paschal Mystery. Discussing the nativity of Jesus as God intimately present with creation in a physical way and Jesus’ passion as indicating the sacrificial dimension of suffering, Berry seems to overlook that the resurrection of Jesus explicitly has any real consequences for the life of the planet today. The alternative I wish to put forth, therefore, is to expand the notion of incarnation in the Christian story and its relevance to the universe story for the sake of including the entire Paschal Mystery: the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. This entire reality is what Jesus assumes in his nativity and, as the

11. *Befriending the Earth*, 82.

first-fruit of creation, is the model we look to and look forward to in the fullness of time.¹²

Berry advocates for divine immanence and the sacramentality of Earth, ways that God is present and active in the world from the beginning of time up to today and into the future. He also argues for a series of transformations occurring throughout the universe resulting in greater complexity and consciousness. For Christians, this transformation is understood in a new way in the unique and important event of the nativity of Jesus Christ, the manifestation of God in the world in a new mode of being, as a human who is born into time and space. While this doctrine of incarnation has been argued throughout Christianity's history, Berry himself does not consider Jesus to be the pinnacle, the crowning jewel of all creation, or as Rahner might say, the human come to self-transcendence, but rather as one event of transformation in the context of the universe's multi-billion-year-long history.¹³ Instead of being the apex of creation, where evolutionary processes no longer have any importance and are no longer needed because creation has finally been fulfilled in the birth of a saviour, Jesus Christ, Berry might argue that Jesus, while being an important figure in history and an important occasion of divine immanence, is not the fulfillment or completion of this transformation in and of itself. We are still very much on the way toward this reality.

I agree with Berry that Jesus fits very securely into the context of cosmogenesis and is an important moment of transformation for the world where he lives a life of sacrifice for the good of others and helps them to encounter through the experiences of their own lives the immanent God in their midst. Jesus himself undergoes his own series of transformations throughout his human life, but I argue these transformations culminate not simply in his birth as a divine being enfleshed in the cosmos but in his resurrection from the

12. 1 Cor. 15.23 (NRSV).

13. See Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, 451, for developments of Christological doctrine. See also Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. K. Kruger, vol. 5.VI.1 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) for discussion on Jesus as the self-transcendence of the cosmos.

dead, the greatest and most meaningful transformation of all. Jesus endures severe pain and suffering in his passion for the sake of his commitment to the divine mission and, when he has been raised to new life, he emerges victoriously in triumph over death.

This does not mean, however, that Jesus' tortured body is somehow made pristine, covering over any indication of the brutality of his death. Rather, Jesus appears with the marks of his passion and death still on his body, though he is transfigured to the point where, in the gospel stories, he gleams like white, has an ethereal quality about him, and is wholly unrecognizable even to those closest to him.¹⁴ Jesus is raised wounded yet glorified, and I think that this, being wounded yet glorified, might be how we can understand Berry's belief that temporal ecological damage lasts eternally in the resurrection. What we do now and how we choose to treat Earth carries with it lasting effects, but this does not have to mean that Earth will be utterly destroyed in the fullness of the Reign of God with no hope of final transformation. Rather, we can continue to hope for a renewed existence, a new heaven and a new earth that, like Jesus, is transformed but still bears the marks of suffering inflicted upon it.

Augustine, in *The City of God*, offers a way to think through resurrected bodies retaining their wounds. Entertaining the idea of what happens to a body in the resurrection that has any kind of blemish marring human beauty in this life so that the natural substance remains and is yet altered to a beautiful quality, Augustine appeals to the example of the martyrs.¹⁵ Suffering at the hands of others in the name of Christ, Augustine asserts that somehow God will supply whatever is necessary for the sake of maintaining bodily integrity while avoiding any diminution. The martyrs will retain the marks of their wounds in their immortal bodies, without any privation, and these will not be deformities but marks of honor that make the martyrs more beautiful. While this may seem like another justification for the defeatist attitude Berry seeks to combat, that being "what is done is done and it doesn't really matter because God will fix it in the end," I think that the inclusion of wounds in resur-

14. Matt. 28:3, Jn. 20:17, Lk. 24:13-33, Jn. 20:11-18.

15. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, XXII.19 (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

rected bodies says something about the place of suffering within the resurrection.

In Christian understanding suffering necessarily accompanies resurrection—it did for Jesus and so it will for all of us. As Jesus suffers on the cross, God remains near in silent presence accompanying Jesus from one life to the next; and in the midst of utter travail, Jesus holds God's hand throughout the process of his death and the darkness of the tomb.¹⁶ As he is raised triumphantly from the tomb, Jesus returns to his friends, speaks peace to those in his midst, and invites his doubting disciple Thomas to touch his wounds.¹⁷

These marks of suffering that remain in Jesus' body when he appears risen from the tomb indicate resurrection is a complete transformation, not simply a covering over of transgressions, an ignoring or forgetting of past wrongs, or a magical kind of making-better. Rather it is a visible, public statement conveying that God is not only able, but desires, to work within the past hurts of our reality and transform them into something good and true and beautiful.

Augustine makes clear that when the martyrs are resurrected, they exist in their glorified bodies without deformation and yet are still wounded. This scarred wound, Augustine says, is a testament to the glory and the virtue of the martyrs.¹⁸ While, like the resurrection itself, we cannot say just how this reconstitution of matter happens, we can be confident God will do it. Instead of receiving a new and different body that is glorified, in the resurrection the martyrs retain their same earthly body that God makes glorified. The resurrection is not an event that happens outside of God's one act of creating or a moment of intermittent action by a wholly transcendent deity; rather, it is a continuation of the martyrs' lives that move from earthly to eternal. It is this transformation among many throughout their lives on Earth that brings the martyrs to fulfillment, and in the resurrection, adorns them with beauty and luminosity.

This must be how Earth can be resurrected in any fullness if we believe that temporal damage is in fact eternal damage. Earth has to

16. Edward Schillebeeckx, Christ, *The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 467.

17. Mt. 28:9, 10, 16-20, Mk. 16:9-20, Lk. 24:13-51, Jn. 20:11-30.

18. Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.19.

retain the wounds we have imposed through our indiscriminate use of resources, while still being glorified by participating in divine life; and while possessing those wounds, there is still nothing lacking or deformed. This transformation to resurrected life is just one in the series of transformations in which Earth participates as it remains all one reality. There is no brand new Earth that is going to instantly appear in the fullness of the resurrection. It is *this* Earth, *this* cosmos we live in right now, that will be made new through the resurrection, precisely because of God's immanent presence in the world. Through this presence God cares for this world and this life and continuously makes these realities holy and new.

Implications

By retaining the wounds inflicted by humans, Earth's eternal scars are made testament to the planet's honor and beauty, as expression of God in the world, as bedrock of our existence, and as locus of the matrices of life. If we do not expand incarnation to include considerations of the resurrection as a final, glorified, and complete transformation of all life as exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth in his Paschal Mystery, then we are left with God in the world but no hope of any future, of final fulfillment. If we do not look to Christ as a model for Christian resurrection—of fulfillment and glorification in his suffering, then when Berry says that any temporal damage we inflict on Earth will remain eternally, what that must necessarily mean is that there can never be any justice for the planet, that the material world really has no value, and that the anthropocentrism that Berry rails against will remain forever as it relates to life on the planet.

If there is no final transformation in the resurrection like Jesus's, then all of the distorted relationships humans have with Earth will never be repaired. We humans have irreparably damaged Earth and even if we work diligently now to right our past wrongs, we continue to be finite beings on Earth for a limited amount of time. There is no way that in our limited capacity we will ever be able to restore what we have caused Earth to lose. What is required is justice, a sense of equality in mutual relationships that seeks to rectify rela-

tionships on a cosmic scale.¹⁹ Nothing, no creature, will ever reach fulfillment by living out natural life processes here on Earth while humans continue to inflict damage by destroying habitats and polluting ecosystems. What remains is simply the same pattern of disordered relationship that Earth has always participated in when it comes to the degradation of it by humans. We need the resurrection as an opportunity for justice, for a righting of relationship on a universal scale that will never be fully realized here in this life.

If there is no resurrection that includes any kind of glorified transformation for Earth, the material world will be seen as inferior and even unnecessary. Through the resurrection we know the physical world is the locus of divine immanence and where God is at work in the world, constantly deifying created matter. In this way, the material world mediates who God is to us and is the primary mode of divine revelation. Aquinas says that even in the presence of the Beatific Vision, our souls are not truly happy until they are reunited with the physical body.²⁰ Our bodies are the way we present ourselves to the world and convey the message to others of who we are. The material world also presents itself as being a representation of what matters to God, that is, a multiplicity of expressions of life reflecting the multi-faceted goodness of God.²¹ Even in death, Augustine remarks, the physical mediates.²² If there is no final trans-

19. For a discussion on justice in various ethical contexts, see: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. John Warrington, V (London: Dent, 1963).

20. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, 4.LXXIX.11 (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1923).

21. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I.47.1 (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947-1948).

22. Augustine, *City of God*, XI.24, XII.4-5. Augustine maintains that in the destructive fire, corruptible elements and bodies perish but somehow are transformed by God in the resurrection by having qualities added that make the body more harmonious and contribute to the renewal of the new heaven and new earth into something better than it was before. It seems that if the primary function of the created world is to give glory to God by conveying Beauty, there would be no need for it in the resurrection if we are in the presence of the Beatific Vision itself. However, Augustine maintains that it is precisely because of creation's function of mediating divinity through beauty that creation is necessary in the resurrection so that it may continue to reflect the radiance of God, causing those who experience this to delight in it.

formation for the material world, the physical ceases to exist, and the divine attributes matter conveys are lost. We need the resurrection to preserve the physical so that it can eternally continue to reveal God in many modes of being.

Finally, if there is no total and complete transformation in the resurrection for Earth as humans continue to devastate life on the planet, causing temporal and eternal damage, the anthropocentric worldview that keeps humans at the centre of the universe is perpetuated. This worldview where the human is self-referent and Earth is derivative and where our human desires are more important than the life of the planet as a whole, is the cause of our current ecological crisis. Yet, humans cannot exist without the planet that gives us life. As Berry states, “We cannot save ourselves without saving the world in which we live.... We will live or die as this world lives or dies.”²³ The changes humans make in Earth are irreversible. One species should not be the determining factor for whether or not other forms of created life continue in existence. In the anthropocentric view this world matters only as matter that is passing away and is to be used to benefit humans. For God all beings matter eternally and even in their suffering and in some cases extinction will be glorified. It is up to God, not us, to determine what is important and prioritized in creation and, since God is a god of love, we believe that God wills life in abundance for all, and not just some. In the Christian understanding Jesus died a sacrificial death that others may live. We believe his sacrifice and love were made possible by his vision and expectation of resurrected life. We like him realize this world is not for us alone. We live in the promise in the fullness of being and of all beings, and in the promise of the resurrection give ourselves to them.

Conclusion

It seems that resurrection, then, as described in the Christian tradition of a wounded yet glorified reality, can be a helpful way to

23. Thomas Berry, “Christianity’s Role in the Earth Project,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 131.

consider the transformation we seek for Earth when we consider the degradation being imposed by humans. As Thomas Berry asserts, we must care now for Earth and not wait for a future where God will magically make things better, but we can look to the future for a resurrection that acknowledges the suffering of Earth while transforming it into something glorified. In this way, the immanence of God in creation making it holy, the agency of all beings acting upon each other in a symbiosis, and the series of transformations working in the cosmos to bring it to greater complexity and consciousness find an ultimate fulfillment, not only in our inadequate attempts to fix the world we have broken, but in the mercy of God who is present in silent nearness accompanying Earth through suffering and into new life. In this vision, the temporal damage we inflict does remain eternal, but it does not have to remain deformed or lacking anything. Instead we can achieve justice for Earth, valuing the material world as a source of divine revelation, and moving away, finally, from the anthropocentrism at work in the world today as we look forward to our future at home on Earth both now and eternally.