

# The Eighth Day of Creation

Psalm 8 & Romans 8: 18-25

*First Sunday in Easter/ 15<sup>th</sup> April 2007*

Resurrection. Baptism. Creation. Three themes thread together by this season of Eastertide. Three themes thread together in this service. Three themes thread together by the Christian life. Resurrection. Baptism. Creation.

Come with me on a little journey where this might make more sense. If we were to travel together to Italy and went to Milan, the first place I would take you is to the Duomo – the cathedral. Constructed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it sits on one of the earliest Christian worship sites in Europe. I would take you into the crypt, down a narrow stair to the very site where, tradition has it St. Ambrose (c.340-397) baptized St. Augustine (354-430), one of the greatest theological minds of Western Christianity, on Easter Sunday, 387.<sup>1</sup> Augustine became a Christian late in life; St. Ambrose was his mentor. I would bring you to the edge of the massive baptismal font, more like a pool with eight, equal sides, a font that could easily hold thirty adults three feet deep. On the day of resurrection, Augustine was baptized, entering the *new* creation of life in Christ. Can you see how they're connected? But why the number eight?

In the Epistle to Barnabus (actually more of a religious tract than epistle), one of the earliest Christian texts outside the New Testament, written between 70 and 135 in Alexandria, we see that the early church understood every Sunday as Easter Sunday and often referred to it as the Eighth Day. “On that Sabbath, after I have set everything at rest,” the text reads, “I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is *the beginning of another world*... That is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus...arose from the dead.” In celebrating the resurrection we worship a God who delights in making new people and new worlds.

Why is Sunday called the Eighth Day? It has to do with Jewish and early Christian numerology, which was very important to our ancestors. Seven was considered the number of completeness, seven vices, seven virtues, seven days in the week, seven notes on the musical scale. But when Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, the day *after* the Jewish Sabbath, the day *after* the seventh day, the early church began to

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<sup>1</sup>See Augustine's account in his conversion and baptism in *Confessions*.

notice the significance of the number eight. There were eight members of Noah's family saved in the flood, which has loads of baptismal associations. Jewish boys, like Jesus, were circumcised on the eighth day "as a mark of the eternal covenant between God and his chosen people (Genesis 17:10-13)." The resurrection of Jesus on the eighth day signals the salvation of God given to the world. The eighth day is not simply the start of another week in time. The eighth day is the first day of the first full week of the *new* creation.

Eight came to be identified with the number of new beginnings, eight is the number of rebirth, the number for renewal, starting over, yet entirely new – like being born again, or when Paul said in Christ we are a "new creation." Baptismal fonts came to have eight sides because baptism is identification with resurrection, we might call it the Easter sacrament, where the new life offered in Christ, the new creation breaks forth in the life of an old creation. An octagon shaped building, the Anastasis (meaning resurrection), was even built over the site of Christ's entombment and resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Resurrection. Baptism. *New Creation*. They're all connected. They can't be severed.

There's an even stronger tie. Circumcision, baptism, and resurrection are also mysteriously connected. Scholars have identified the number eight as having a "material aspect," circumcision and baptism are physical acts and Christ was physically resurrected, not spiritually resurrected as the Gnostics preached. Megan Hitchens suggests in her study of numerology in the Celtic *Book of Kells*, these three acts, along with the number eight, "sanctify rather than condemn the physical state."<sup>3</sup> This is the stronger tie – they all have a material or physical aspect. You can't have resurrection without a body and you can't have a body unless you're a creature and to be a creature means you're connected to the creation.

For us to talk about resurrection and new creation, therefore, has to mean more than just a spiritual, private, individualistic state, there's more to it. The early church believed that baptism in Christ has cosmic implications; it said something about all of creation. To be a new creation in this old creation means that being Christian inevitably, somehow, means participating in the renewing of the creation. Paul, himself, says, that not only creatures, but the creation itself has been waiting with eager

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Caemmerer, *Visual Art in the Life of the Church* : Encouraging creative worship and witness in the congregation (Augsburg, 1983)

<sup>3</sup> Megan M. Hitchens, "Building on Belief: The Use of Sacred Geometry and Number Theory in the Book of Kells, f. 33r" [http://www.sca.org.au/scribe/articles/building\\_on\\_belieft.htm](http://www.sca.org.au/scribe/articles/building_on_belieft.htm)

longing for its redemption, to be set free from a bondage to decay (Romans 8: 18-23). Creation is included with the resurrection of Christ. Redemption *of bodies* should have some bearing upon this heavenly body we call earth.

All of this is critically relevant on this first Sunday in Eastertide, as we approach our “Caring for Creation” series, even as, it seems, everywhere we turn this issue is being discussed. It’s more than just being “politically correct” or being convinced of an “Inconvenient Truth.” It raises critical questions: *Is our Sunday worship, which is integrally tied to Easter, is this weekly participation in the New Creation of resurrection somehow impugned or mocked when we, particularly Christians, are careless with creation? Does the Easter message ring less true if Christians aren’t concerned about the redemption of creation?* And what is the connection between the water used in baptism and the waters of creation and a Christian’s concern about whether there’s enough clean drinking water available in the world. Future wars in Africa will not be fought over fossil fuels, but good water, which is tough to obtain for your child who is dying of thirst because of devastating droughts brought on by global warming. It’s all connected.

Actually, a good case can be made that most Christians are environmental sinners, silent on the growing concerns over global warming, guilty of sins of omission and commission. A good case can be made that the theology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that developed around the same time of the industrial revolution actually baptized and sanctioned the destruction of the environment for capital gain. A mistranslation of Genesis 2:15 had generations dominating nature, making it conform to the destructive ends of humanity and our desire for more capital, instead of being the steward or caretaker God called Adam and his heirs to be.

The way we fathom the gospel, how we view Easter can have something profound to contribute to solving this crisis. We can’t just spiritualize the gospel away, making it only personal or individualistic; it has to have a wider, broader, more cosmic understanding. It’s one of the ways we love our neighbor, otherwise we might be guilty of drowning our neighbor. How can we love our neighbor when the way we live contributes to the destruction of life for others? The writer and environmentalist, Bill McKibben points out, “given that 85 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian, and that [US] manage[s] to emit 25 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide -- ...the future of Christian environmentalism may have something significant to do with the future of the planet.”<sup>4</sup> “The U. N. estimates that climate change will produce 150

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<sup>4</sup> Bill McKibben, “Born Again, Again,” <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2006/10/05/mckibben>

million environmental refugees by mid-century. And very few of them will have done anything to cause the problem – while we in the U. S. produce a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide.”<sup>5</sup> And China and India are quickly catching up with us.

What can we do? This can all be overwhelming. First, we can confess our sin; realize we're part of the problem. Repent and live renewed. Become aware. Then do something. We don't have to all become environmental activists. In fact, Calvin DeWitt, professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and also an evangelical Christian argues that we can make a difference by thinking *less* about the environment and more about creation. The word “environment,” he explains, was first coined by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) in the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The environment came to be understood as something “out there,” something we observe, control, and use. We separated ourselves from the environment and saw it as having a life of its own. It was a significant linguistic shift in our Western consciousness that occurred during the Renaissance. Before his time we had a more biblical view of reality, we saw ourselves not a *part* from creation, but part of it. The biblical view is that to be a creature is to be part of creation, not separated from it.

Jesus called us to love one another (John 15:12). Loving one another, the creature, as God calls us to do, must include loving the creation where people live and glorify God. To care for creation is another way we care for people, even love those yet to be born. Loving the creature and the creation is the work of God, which means part of doing the will of God and being a disciple means loving creation and the creature. It's all connected – like resurrection, baptism, and creation, *new creation*. It's why Christians care. It's what means to be children of the Eighth Day.

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<sup>5</sup> Bill McKibben, “Drown Your Neighbor,” March 7, 2007. [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)

<sup>6</sup> From an interview transcript with Krista Tippett:  
[www.speakingoffaith/programs/discoveringwherewelive/transcript.shtml](http://www.speakingoffaith/programs/discoveringwherewelive/transcript.shtml)