Close your eyes for a moment. Take a breath. I want you to remember the most beautiful place you’ve ever been; the place where you’ve felt the calmest, where your soul was so in awe of the place you were in, you could almost laugh.

Now – by show of hands – how many of you have something growing in that place? A tree? Seagrass? How many of you could hear a river or ocean where you were? How many of you were by a lake or great mountain, steadfast in their character? Open your eyes, look around. You, my friends without even knowing it, have walked on holy ground.

How many of you remember that part in the Torah? Moses, having met God in the guise of a fantastic burning shrub, approaches. God tells Moses to remove his shoes, for he walks on holy ground. Or when Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau’s wrath, falls asleep in the desert. He dreams of angels climbing up and down a ladder to God, and when he awakes, he thinks, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. He builds a stacked stone altar to God, and moves on his way.

Or think of how many times Jesus tells his followers, his students, to look at the world around them to see evidence of God’s grace and love. Look at ravens, he says. Look at sparrows. See the lilies of the field? How they are more beautiful than any king’s clothing? Faith is like a mustard seed, and sometimes paying attention to how things grow and how they die is a greater spiritual study than reading books. The seven corporal mercies we learn teach us to treat all creation as holy ground – to feed the earth, to water it, to shelter from pollution, to clothe it in new seed, to visit the earth, to heal it when we can, and to grieve when we cannot. Even the smallest iteration of these acts – a backyard garden, or an aloe plant in a kitchen window – does not go unnoticed. The Talmud argues – God so loves each creation – that every single blade of grass has its own angel whispering, “Grow, grow!” Holy ground indeed.

Or, if you’re still not convinced, think of how many times God describes God’s power as a mountain face; a desert in bloom, or a mighty river. God appears as a whirlwind, as a pillar of fire, and a small burning bush. But only if you’re paying attention.

See, here’s the thing I’ve been thinking about through this Easter week, especially as Earth Day gets closer and spring is in full bloom. I don’t think I’m very good at paying attention right now. I didn’t grow up that way. There is no beauty in the world that my family does not revere, no beauty that does not make my family pause and be thankful for the world we live in. My cousin, the most practical and hard-headed man you are ever likely to meet, still stops every morning on his way to the milking parlor to watch the illuminated mist fall from mountains to fields, a wave of gray to misty gold falling on wide, quiet green. My grandmother, waiting to pick my brother up from school, would drive me around the neighborhood and name each flower she saw blooming for me, a riot of rhododendrons, chrysanthemums, and dahlias. Flowers I still know, light I still love, because my family taught me to pay attention to the holiness of beauty.

I think part of what happened is I went to seminary, and started learning a theological language for things I already knew were holy. I started thinking more, and doing less. I wrote about flowers, instead of growing them. I spoke about living water, instead of diving in. I’ve resolved to change that. Not my theological education – that I cannot change, and I don’t want to. But I’ve decided to walk on holy ground as well as study it.

So think back to your place, the most beautiful place you’ve ever been. Were you paying attention? Were you grateful? The theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers… people [can] learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture.” So you all – who love oceans, and rivers, deserts and mountains, green growing grasses and tall shady trees – did you know that you were praying, that the feet of your spirits were bare when you went?

You all go to this church twice a week. Maybe you go to another on Sunday. And churches are a great place to pray. But here is what I encourage you to do. This Saturday, Earth Day, I encourage you to slip the shoes from your spirit, to walk in this great creation that reflects God’s continued love and grace, and pay attention. Watch how the aloe plants bloom right now, the way light turns golden at 6 AM, how the ground stays warm and soft as evening falls. Learn to love this home we have in common, and – as with all loving relationships – learn to care for it. Church is a great place to pray, but so is everywhere else.