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John 20:1-18
 "Passion Flowers"

During the five weeks of Lent and Holy Friday we focused on the underside of life: abuse, destructive behavior and death. We are ready for Easter! We are ready for wholeness, healing and life!

Throughout Lent I said often that on Easter Sunday we will have a full-blown expression of life.

The stories of Jesus' resurrection are clear indications that God's story does not end in death. Life is the final word.

However, resurrection is only resurrection when counter-posed with death. No death, no resurrection. And so we look back to the passion or suffering of Holy Friday.

Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and mocked, scorned, beaten, tried, denied, and nailed to a cross. He suffered the most gruesome death of his day.

Think of Jesus and the events of Holy Friday when I quote from sections of Maya Angelou's famous poem about the African-American experience, "Still I Rise." She takes us to the cross and.....resurrection.

You may write me down in history
 With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may trod me in the very dirt
 But still, like dust, I'll rise...

Did you want to see me broken?
 Bowed head and lowered eyes?
 Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
 Weakened by my soulful cries.

You may shoot me with your words,
 You may cut me with your eyes,
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,
 But still, like air, I'll rise...

Out of the huts of history's shame
 I rise
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain
 I rise...

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

That's a full-blown expression of Easter. I can end right there and we would have an Easter message but I'll travel further on the Easter road.

I've been a pastor for 28 years and have officiated at many funeral and memorial services. Officially, we call the service "A Witness to the Resurrection." We also call it "A Celebration of Life."

When I have been in a church for a while, and it's been almost four years here, I get to know the members and when a member dies I think of a biblical passage that best relates to that member and I preach a life-affirming homily from the passage.

When a lover of gardening dies I invariably select the gospel story just read by Debbie where the resurrected Jesus is mistaken for a gardener.

Since Mary thinks the gardener is Jesus she must be surrounded by a lovely, landscaped garden. We call the place "the garden tomb."

Since this place of resurrection is covered in flowers, flowers have come to be associated with life and so we place flowers in the cross at Redwoods Presbyterian Church each Easter. Lilies symbolize Easter and flowers are placed on graves and at memorials for the dead as we experienced this week in the aftermath of the tragic shooting in Oakland. Thousands of flowers were placed at the gate of Buckingham Palace after the death of Princess Diana. Universally, flowers symbolize life.

If you drive or walk up Tamalpais Drive and before turning into Magnolia Avenue you see shops on your left. One of the shops is "Passion Flowers." I looked that way in the fifth week of Lent and it struck me that the flowers in the cross today can be called "passion flowers."

They flower the passion of Jesus. Passion means suffering. It occurred to me that resurrection is our way of saying that suffering does not have the final word in our world.

Suffering is an imposter. We differ from religions that claim that suffering is the primary reality of life; that it always exists. Such spiritualities state that "To live means to suffer, because human nature is not perfect and neither is the world we live in. During our lifetime, we inevitably have to endure physical suffering such as pain, sickness, injury, tiredness, old age, and eventually death; and we have to endure psychological suffering like sadness, fear, frustration, disappointment, and depression."

The last part is true but suffering for Christians is not and never will be the primary reality of life. Granted, certain Christians believe in "original sin" which goes back to the

primordial garden where Adam and Eve sinned and subsequently, they say, every generation was born into sin or infected at birth.

Most of us don't think that way. Bay Area author and teacher Matthew Fox who wrote a book called *Original Blessing* speaks about original woundedness. We come into the world beautiful and blessed. We are intrinsically worthy and valuable since we are created in the image of God. As we grow we are wounded in various ways and when we are wounded we suffer.

All of Jesus' life and his resurrection communicate that life is the primary reality. Suffering is secondary. Granted, we suffer because we live in an imperfect world but life, health, healing and wholeness are our primary reality. It's the beginning and end of life and continues after life. Resurrection is the immune system that keeps the virus of suffering at bay.

Jesus said that he came to bring life in all its fullness. He says: The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy but I come that you may have life in all its fullness. Jesus helps us claim and reclaim the blessing of our birth. In Christ we face and overcome the imposter suffering.

Jesus himself faced the onslaughts of a world that couldn't deal with his powerful message of compassion, peace, love and justice and like Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Sister Dorothy Stang in the forests of the Amazon, he was annihilated. He suffered and died.

And that's where we come today – to the garden tomb and resurrection. The story is full of symbols, images and mystical appearances (of angels and clothing and of Jesus himself). It's like a dream.

Apart from Jesus's mystical presence and his communication with Mary the flowers convey the sense that Jesus' suffering was over. The passion is covered in flowers and Jesus is alive and active. It's a mystery.

I wanted to speak more about the healing and holistic properties of flowers as a resurrection symbol but there's no time. A brief glimpse:

Google "healing properties of flowers" and you get an endless list.

Flowers die and rise again. Flowers come in all shapes, sizes and colors. The beauty and ethereal quality of flowers exude life.

Flowers make excellent gifts. The primary gift-giver is God. We don't know how the earth came into being apart from the Big Bang which one hears at the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco where Suellen and I are members. We *believe* that God was in the creation of the world and holds it together. In this creation flowers proliferate and they give us *joie de vivre*.

I visited the shop "Passion Flowers" last week. It was closed so I called the number on the sign and spoke with the owner Linda. I told her that I would give her a plug in my Easter sermon. She was grateful. Florists are conduits for our gift-giving.

Finally, flowers affirm peace and justice. We remember the sixties when young people placed flowers in the barrels of guns of the National Guard during Vietnam War protests. There's a World Flower Council, begun in Japan, dedicated to furthering the cause of world peace through the beauty of flowers and the sharing of knowledge among those who have chosen the floral industry as their profession. There are international peace gardens throughout the world.

The name "Passion Flowers" has a wonderful sense of ambiguity. I am passionate about the resurrection. Why not? It's the grace our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, life in community for us, now and forever! Amen.