

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
March 31, 2013
Easter Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12
"Joyfully Surprised"

The worship service today follows a theme begun last Sunday. It was stated then that Palm Sunday was a glimpse of Easter: a little joyful after being somber during Lent. My sermon was called "a joyful glimpse."

Today, on Easter, we are in the full throes of joy. For this brief hour we forget the cares of the world and meditate on joy.

First, we turn to the gospel text just read. In many traditional homes, the family and perhaps a friend or two, kindly, gently and reverentially bathe a dead body. In the Gospel text today a group of women go to the tomb in which Jesus was placed to perform this task.

It's amazing that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, in other words, an unnumbered group of women, visit the tomb to wash Jesus' body with spices that they had carefully prepared.

I'm not really surprised about this because Jesus affirmed women throughout his ministry. He defied religious and secular codes that narrowly defined a women's role in society. He spoke with the woman at the well as an equal, he touched and healed a woman with a flow of blood, and he affirmed women's aspirations to spiritual leadership. It's all in the gospels.

The joyful surprise is the mention of *all* the women in this story and the fact that they are the first to hear of Jesus' resurrection and they are the first to tell the good news of the resurrection to others. Women are the first evangelists and Luke honestly and boldly writes about it.

The story states that the women encounter men in dazzling clothes which is a clue that we are meant to interpret this story symbolically or metaphorically.

Dazzling clothes symbolize angels or messengers from God and they come with the Easter message: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" "The living, you're got to be kidding. We were looking for the dead among the dead." The men say: "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

The penny drops. What a joyful surprise! And now the women joyfully run to tell this good news to the apostles and (guess what?) the patriarchal conclave thinks it's an idle tale. No surprise here but Peter gets up and runs to the tomb. He stoops and looks in and sees the linen cloths by themselves and goes home amazed at what had happened.

I'm joyfully surprised and pleased that there is one man in the group who breaks away and goes to see for himself and he too is joyfully surprised.

That's today's gospel story for Easter and it's one, big, joyful surprise.

I was joyfully surprised in my office three years ago. There was a knock on the church door. I opened it to a young man of high school age. He introduced himself and asked if I was the pastor. I said I was and he said he wanted to speak with me. I invited him in to my office.

He said he had visited a couple of pastors to find out what their theology was. I'm not sure he used the word "theology." His was a personal journey of discovery – perhaps self-discovery. He was confident and self-assured.

I asked him where he had visited and to tell me something about himself, what precipitated the search, and why here.

It turned out that he had dropped out of high school because the academics were not challenging him and he was now on his own path of discovery. Religion was an interest which didn't surprise me because religion is at the heart of any true searcher.

One of my theology professors said that just as *Homo sapiens* were naturally human they were also *Homo religio*, in other words, naturally religious. He pointed to natural activities of pre-scientific human beings where they offered items to something beyond themselves at burial sites and the like.

The young man in my office was pursuing a natural path as far as I was concerned and I was very interested in his search. He was exceptionally bright and told me that he did not believe in God. I wondered whether he visited my office like the women in the gospel story today with spices to bathe the dead.

My thoughts were: "Why do you seek the living among the dead." For this young man God was dead and he was about to confirm it in my office.

I asked him to tell about the God he did not believe in. He regaled about bigotry and violence in the Bible and prejudice and brutality in the inquisitions and crusades – all condoned by God. He spoke of fundamentalists of all religions that denied human dignity to those outside their narrow world. He delved into evolution and creation. He reached as far as he could into the most outrageous aspects of God's certification of racism, feminism and sexual orientation as he saw it.

He ended as suddenly as he began. We fell silent. He looked at me and eagerly awaited my response. I told him I totally agreed with him. It wasn't the God I believed in either. He fell off his chair. I think he was joyfully surprised.

I sought permission to share my ideas of a compassionate, caring, inclusive, loving, life-affirming and justice-seeking God, also found in the Bible. I agreed that many of the writings of the Bible were culturally-determined and conveyed things frowned upon today by reasonable thinkers. Taken literally they could justify ethnic violence and wars and God's stamp of approval of such; and there were many misinterpretations of passages throughout the Bible. The young man was all ears.

In the place of death he found life, thank God. There was another silence and in what was akin to tears he told me that he was gay. I listened once again and heard another story and assured him of God's love for him as he was, a child of God, and we explored ways of re-entering the world with courage, dignity, grace and strength.

In the conclusion of our discussion, I encouraged him to finish formal schooling and go on to higher education. We shook hands and he left my office and that was the last I saw of him.

I suspect he is in university somewhere studying astrophysics or law or medicine or something and hopefully enjoying a loving, life-affirming community and relationships. I can see him in the front line of students opposing institutional discrimination of millions of Americans while the U.S. Supreme Court discusses The Federal Defense of Marriage Act and California's Proposition 8. He might even attend a worship service occasionally.

Think of a time when you were joyfully surprised and it had a resurrection outcome. One of the most important for me was the dramatic change of government in South Africa after the apartheid years. We never imagined during apartheid that the ruling Nationalist Party would give up power and move towards an all-inclusive system where everyone had a vote.

We struggled for peace and justice inside and outside the country. The efforts of everyone were trickles of tributaries that flowed into streams which flowed into rivers and finally into one huge river that to our joyful surprise toppled apartheid.

Easter is a day of joyful surprises, a time when we reflect on the joyful surprises in our lives and of joyful surprises yet to come.

Very often, joyful surprises don't simply happen. They come after we work to establish God's inclusive realm on earth as Jesus did, or after a search for meaning like the young man in my office, or in struggles for peace and justice as we worked in and out of South Africa.

The charge for us on this Easter Sunday is to do God's good work and when we do we will be joyfully surprised – and whenever that happens we will taste the sweetness of Easter. Amen.