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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
March 27, 2016  
Easter Sunday

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 28:1-8  
“Easter Vignettes”

Last Sunday after church, my wife, Suellen and I went shopping at Whole Foods in San Rafael. We went in for two items and came out with 20 items in two bags. It was raining. I told Suellen I'd fetch the car and drive to the where she was standing under an outside shelter. I did so and Suellen dashed in the rain and opened the trunk, and out of nowhere, a man appeared with an umbrella and shielded her from the rain. I'm calling him “the man with the umbrella.” His kindness is an expression of Easter, and thus, my first Easter vignette.

The next day, I tilled my 8x4x2-feet organic garden box and dug in compost and fertilizer in preparation for spring planting. I pulled weeds that proliferated around the box. I thought, like Jesus, who used numerous gardening analogies, that if we want a good Easter, a good life, we have to pull the weeds in our life and nurture our gardens. Coming to worship today is a good move. That's my second Easter vignette.

The third vignette reflects on the enormous amount of deaths we have experienced in our church community lately. Giants of the church and community died and you may think it has been a period of somberness. It has not. We mourned the losses and celebrated the lives of these amazing folk.

Christians hold a death in two hands. In one hand, we mourn the loss and in the other, we celebrate the life, the life the person lived and the life the person now lives with God in God's heavenly abode. Most people call memorial services a celebration of life. What we are actually saying is that they are a witness to the resurrection. Every person who died this year had an incredible life and we live in the hope that he or she now lives eternally with God. That's Easter.

The fourth and fifth vignettes unpack the scripture readings today. We begin with the Isaiah passage.

When we read the Isaiah text in worship a few months ago I knew then that it would be one of my Easter passages. The prophet speaks about fasting. He castigates those who physically fast but do not do the works of God. He proclaims a better fast.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your

bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

"Then," he says, "your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. That's Easter.

"Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall *rise* in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. That's Easter.

"The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall *raise* up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." That's Easter.

The gospel lesson is an actual resurrection story. In the March 14 Presbyterian Outlook magazine, Presbyterian pastor, Heidi Husted Armstrong, writes, "In the half-light of that early dawn, the sudden blazing-neon appearance of that angel must have nearly scared the living daylights out of those women, announcing, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.' (Matthew 28:5-6).

"It makes me wonder," writes Armstrong, "what if the stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in? And what if our Easter preaching voiced that same invitation: Come and see.

"What if we said, especially to those who come to worship reluctantly, to the skeptics who brace themselves, 'just come and check it out'? A frontal lobotomy is not a prerequisite for faith. Take your time. Bring your questions. Bring you, the real you.

"It isn't long before the women are grasped by the great mystery that Jesus is alive. Next thing you know, the angel instructs them to 'go quickly ... and tell his disciples [that Jesus] has been raised from the dead.' (Matthew 28:7). Go and tell! Even though they haven't even seen the risen Lord yet! Even though they have no social status and the testimony of women would not stand up in a Jewish court of law. Still, the women are off – they are all 'go and tell.'"

Armstrong concludes, "Perhaps it is important to note that nobody ever literally sees Jesus rise from the dead. There are no actual observers of the resurrection, so no one can really prove it. The message is not: 'It happened like this.' It's not 'three convincing

proofs of the resurrection.' The message is: It's happened! Resurrection can't be proved; it can only be proclaimed.

"What needs to be said at Easter is that Jesus is alive! What needs to be said is that the power of sin and death is conquered! There is no tragedy that God cannot redeem, no mess that the risen Christ cannot overcome. Everything is different now! God's new creation has begun! There's nothing to fear."

The day after the horrendous bomb blasts in Brussels this week, a Brussels resident said, "We must show them that we are not afraid and that life goes on."<sup>1</sup>

In the final vignette, I use "dance" as a metaphor for Easter: In 1980, Suellen was teaching at the Federal Theological Seminary, the leading seminary in South Africa for Black students. We lived on campus in a black township. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was on the board and ninety percent of the faculty comprised the most powerful Black, liberation theologians. People from all over the world visited the campus. One such visitor was Sydney Carter, the composer of the hymn we are about to sing, the famous, "I Danced in the Morning." It tells the entire gospel story.

Suellen and I invited Sydney to our home for afternoon tea. He told us he lived in the East of London and his wife was Russian. Early that day, he spoke to the students at an outside gathering place and danced to his latest composition. His free spirit and freedom to spin and dance was a sign of resurrection life in him.

A couple of centuries after Jesus died, church father, Irenaeus, reflecting on Jesus' resurrection, said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Continue your life to the fullest of your ability. Be guided by God's Word and be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Your own life needs its fullest expression, those around you need it, and the world needs it. Go out and serve the Lord with gladness. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Man on the street interviewed by RT America, March 23, 2016