

“Project Look Up”
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April 4, 2021
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Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

As we come again to Easter again, perhaps this Easter Sunday is particularly ripe for us to name and claim the fact that we come feeling more than one thing. There is, I believe, an acute “both/and” feeling to Easter this year. Sorrow and hope are mingled together. 533, 291 lives lost to COVID in the US [to date](#). We lost a year of gathering together in person for worship and fellowship and even now, are in-person gathering is restricted and limited and many are not safe or ready to join us. The enormity of this devastating loss is not behind us as we gather to celebrate Easter. Racial injustice, gun violence, and stark economic inequities have dogged us all year.

We know that we are living between the times, between the miracle of Easter morning and the final return of Christ at the end of the ages. But here is the mysterious truth of our faith: we are invited to God’s lavish feast of life in the very midst of the “already and not yet” reality of God’s way. After all, God is the one who sets a table before us in the presence of our enemies. We do not wait to proclaim hope, to set the feast, to feed the world, to dare to dance for freedom and justice, even as we mourn our losses. No wonder that we preach resurrection at funerals—because it is the moment when we most need to hear it. Not just for the dead, but for the living to keep on resurrecting our lives here and now.

One instance of resurrecting our lives here and now can be seen in the pictures on the front of today’s Easter bulletin. These pictures come from a [beautiful story](#) told by reporter Lisa Fung, which ran in the New York Times last fall. In the midst of the pandemic, artist Elizabeth Turk imagined umbrellas spreading hope. A retirement community said yes, and became her canvas. When she asked the residents of the Mt. San Antonio Gardens retirement community, “What do you tell yourself when you face adversity?”, their answers inspired her to do a project that would create hope during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Turk envisioned “a wild garden on steroids” for a moving art installation titled “Project: Look Up.” She knew there was no better “community to engage with to remind us of joy and resilience — vulnerable people leading us back to joy and togetherness.”

Deeply inspired by the resilience and optimism displayed by residents of the retirement community, she wanted to create an upbeat experience that would shatter myths of helpless senior citizens. This time, though, the installation would have to remain closed to the public because of safety concerns. Not deterred, Ms. Turk created a multimedia artwork featuring kaleidoscopic images from drone footage of participants as they move about in several locations across the expansive grounds. (I’ve posted this video for you

to see on the church website). (This video will play for you watching at home, directly following my sermon).

On a crisp November day last year, masked participants gathered, each carrying a colorful umbrella featuring the artist's drawings of plants that symbolize success in the face of adversity. The umbrella width helped encourage social distancing. To make "Look Up" more inclusive, the artist arranged to photograph residents who had been unable to participate. Those with mobility issues received a mechanism that allowed umbrellas to be attached to wheelchairs or walkers.

"Look Up" kicked off at the pool — in and around the water — as a saxophonist played soothing jazz and drones buzzed overhead, filming the action. Later, dozens of retirees snaked through the community garden to Tchaikovsky's "March of the Tin Soldiers." On the putting green, several couples danced to "Unchained Melody," encircled by 100 residents swaying their umbrellas to create wide shadows on the grass. For the finale, all participants assembled in a central parking lot, moving in a final interaction before dispersing to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." Many stayed behind, umbrellas still open, not wanting the day to end.

Many of us may be finding ourselves feeling incredibly joyful about this day, not wanting it to end. Some of us are just this weekend being reunited with family not seen in-person for up to a year. Some of us may feel so encouraged by finally being able to gather for in-person worship again. I'm excited to get my first COVID-19 shot tomorrow! For so many reasons, many of us are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. That is why we will "Dare to Dance" again. We will lean into the joy of Easter as a whole season—fifty days of hope and celebration. But while we dance and celebrate, and feast, and parade, we recognize not that the pain or struggle is over, but that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. Joy intermingles with sorrow.

Just as Ms. Turk's art installation reminds us to look up and see, where we may not expect it, beauty, hope and resilience, so too our scripture text in Isaiah invites us to look up. Where do we look? Up to the mountain of God! As we turn our gaze upon God's Holy Mountain, we are reminded from whence comes our help.

There, on God's holy mountain, we see a rich and glorious vision of God laboring to prepare a sumptuous Julia-Childs-worthy meal for ALL people—Israel AND all the peoples of the earth. No one is left out or left behind. All are invited to come to the royal feast: oppressors and oppressed, powerful and lowly, native and foreigner alike.

But just like what makes Ms. Turk's installation good art is the way its beauty comes right in the midst of deep fear, death, and great obstacles, so too, the powerful images in Isaiah 25 are not free of complication or blithely beautiful.

Remember, these are images painted by a people well acquainted with the powers of death, who were living through anything but the beautiful fantasy of the passage. Their daily lives were characterized by deprivation and destruction. Death was a real and constant reality for them just as much as it is for us.

The evocative, apocalyptic pictures jump out at us, dripping with life as they paint a picture where, after too many years in which there was no wine to drink and no songs to sing, people will now participate in a feast of good food and wine, rejoicing in God's salvation at a banquet of exuberant joy.

Such images of life and banquets were a stunning articulation of hope by a beleaguered community. Yet the images were still not real life. And we, too, hear them today while we are still living with death, deprivation, and destruction. They might just make us simultaneously yearn and cringe.

But let's press in precisely here. Consider this: for imagery to work effectively at all for a people so well acquainted with the powers of death, God must be more than just loving, more than just tender. God must be stronger, more voracious, and more vicious than Death. That's why when we look up to the holy Mountain of God, we also see God opening up God's tremendous throat to swallow the great swallower, Death itself.

While we are invited to a rich feast of dishes of fat marrow, the choicest and most luxurious foods, and the finest well-aged wines, all that threatens life: death, mourning, and everything else, is also there on the banquet table too. But that is not on the menu for us but for God. We swallow wine. God swallows the shroud that is cast over all peoples. We fill our plates with lots of our favorite things. God takes Death into God's own self.

Yes, death is present at the feast with us. Indeed, on God's Holy mountain, death and suffering are heavy on the heart of all the guests who came with mourning and weeping. But at the banqueting table, God consumes Death for us. God wipes away the tears from every face. What a picture hope and justice and love. God is present in the chaos. Even now God continues to fight to deliver God's children and creation itself from all that threatens their wellbeing. Therefore, in the midst of suffering and death, there is still reason for a joyful celebration.

Friends, because Jesus is indeed alive, we, like Mary, can know that God has conquered that last enemy, death itself. And at the last, it will be conquered fully. And so, the power of life and the joy of celebration can be ours here and now even as we still await the final glorious fulfillment of all things, when death will be no more forever. Yes, today we still live with death at the table with us. But because of Jesus, we live with life and a sure and certain hope. And that gives us every reason to dance again.

So, today, look up, once more, to God's Holy Mountain. Today and into this Easter season, let us take up the dance again. Let this fifty-day season of Eastertide be for us a time of exciting opportunities: to support and encourage vaccinations; to renew our commitment to acts of masking and physical distancing as life-giving acts of Easter solidarity. And let us be brave and honest in shining the full light on the many continuing inequities that the pandemic has laid bare. With courage and vision, may God lead us in the dance to bringing justice, hope and love to our community. Amen.