



“Resurrection Road Trip!”
Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, April 17, 2022, Easter

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Rev. Dr. Richard Coble, and Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

Isaiah 65:17-25

65:17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

65:18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

65:19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

65:20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

65:21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

65:22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

65:23 They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well.

65:24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

65:25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Luke 24:1-12

24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

24:2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

24:3 but when they went in, they did not find the body.

24:4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

24:5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

24:6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,

24:7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

24:8 Then they remembered his words,

24:9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

24:10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

24:11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

24:12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

(AKKP and RRC walk out with their suitcases and their travel clothes and sit down on the steps waiting for MMS)

RRC: Well, it's finally time. I don't know if I can wait even one more minute!

AKKP: We've been waiting so long! Do you think she's almost here? I mean she said meet her here, Easter Sunday at this exact time.

RRC: She's gotta be getting close. She's as ready for this as we are.

AKKP: Absolutely she is ready! We're all ready for

(MMS walks in with suitcase and travel clothes)

MMS: Resurrection Road Trip, y'all! Can you believe its time?! The moment we've been waiting for--an Easter Sunday where we can finally get on the road to finding Resurrection!!

MMS and AKKP and RRC: Let's do this!!

(AKKP, MMS, RRC all climb into a make believe car. MMS in the driver's seat, AKKP in passenger, RRC in backseat. Everybody puts on sunglasses. MMS turns on the make believe radio)

Born to Be Wild cranks up

(MMS starts to make believe drive)

MMS: *(listening to the music for a few seconds and smiling and driving; turns down the music.)* You know you guys. I gotta be honest. Now that we've started down this road, I'm actually not sure I am ready. I mean the last two years have been so intense. COVID, I lost my mom, John got diagnosed with two kinds of cancer. Resurrection starts to feel like a different destination when death comes so close.

AKKP: Those feelings make a lot of sense, Marcia. It can be overwhelming. And there is so much death around us in this world right now—we don't even know the extent of it with all the under counting of COVID deaths. And then there are so many deaths that just don't need to happen.

RRC: I am feeling some similar stuff. Just last week another black man was killed at a traffic stop by a white police officer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. And over 12,000 deaths from guns just in 2022 so far in this country. One of them in West Asheville on Tuesday.

MMS: *(stops the car)* Can we just pause for a second? This whole resurrection thing. Well I've always wondered—do we cling to it so much because of all the death around us. The grief is just so much when there is so much death, so much sorrow. Is it a way for us to comfort ourselves? Scripture tells us maybe our ancestors in the faith had the same question. I mean even the ones who knew Jesus and knew the scripture saw this as an "idle tale." That's just another way of saying, this is a bunch of nonsense! And then I think about all the ways we create idols "I-d-o-l-s"—gods that serve us, gods that soothe us or keep us from seeing the truth.

AKKP: And I can't help but notice that we have stopped moving now with the weight of it all. We are idle-ing—standing still with the engine still running. And that sitting still can be toxic if you don't turn your engine off and really stop.

RRC: Maybe that's what we need to do—just stop for a minute and check in, get our bearings. Where is it that we think we are going anyway? I mean what if we're headed in the wrong direction.

“We’re on a road to nowhere plays for a second”

(MMS, AKKP, and RRC look around)

MMS and AKKP: Pit stop!

(AKKP, MMS, and RRC get out of the make believe car)

MMS: I was so looking forward to this road trip you guys! And now it’s just stalled out.

AKKP: Yeah, this stinks.

RRC: Hey, I know what will cheer you all up! A story! It’s a story about near death experiences.

MMS and AKKP: Really?

MMS: Richard, I don’t know if this is going to cheer us up.

RRC: Just hear me out; it’s interesting and I think it might help us get back on the road to finding resurrection.

I’m sitting in a hospital room at the bedside of a stranger, as I often did years ago working as a hospital chaplain. The man is Roman Catholic, deeply faithful and deeply certain. His health is faltering, congestive heart failure, a history of heart attacks. We are having a conversation about life and death, and life after death. He tells me this elaborate story about his death, a time when his heart had stopped before being resuscitated. The angel Gabriel stood by his bedside, just as I am sitting with him now. I don’t think to ask how he knew it was Gabriel, rather than any of the other angels named the bible. In the story, Gabriel had scooped him up and held him, as a dazzling cloud of light blanketed the scene.

As a chaplain, I’m not supposed to argue with my patients about beliefs they find supportive and comforting, but in the back of my mind, as you can imagine, I’m arguing with him a bit. I’m turned off by the details of it. It’s too precise, too sure. I want to explain it away, I want to discount it. Sure, you met Gabriel, the same heavenly being who announced the coming of Christ to Mary at the beginning of Luke’s gospel.

After the visit, my supervisor tells me about a study done by an operating room team. The team kept hearing similar stories of out of body experiences in cases of near death. People would claim that they were hovering over their bodies, like they were floating on the

ceiling. So, the OR team put a large, bright red Elmo doll on a top shelf above the patient. Elmo was out of the patient's eye-sight but could certainly have been seen by someone hovering over the top of the room. I'm sorry to report to you on this Easter morning that no one ever reported seeing Elmo in their out of body experiences.

Like the eleven who heard the report of the empty tomb, and thought it an idle tale, we've been testing resurrection, measuring it, rationalizing it, even controlling it.

We force spiritual experiences to fit into our own narratives - as if they could be disproven and discounted if they do not fit our expectations, our measures of what gets to count, our definitions of what is real.

We colonize resurrection. I do it too. The chaplain listening at the bedside to a near death experience. On the one hand, I want to see it at face value - The reality of whatever happened to this man as his heart stopped. But even as I become open to it, there's a part of me that wants to shut it down, to change the subject, and discount it.

How have you tried to contain resurrection, or distrusted it?
What would it take to let resurrection simply and completely do its work, do its resurrection thing?

Amy Kim: Yes, that's what colonization does! It forces everything to fit into its own narratives- comforting those in power with the perception of control.

Marcia: When mystery appears, white systems immediately become skeptical and judgmental.

Richard: But where does that leave us - stuck between our hope to stay open to God's mystery, and also falling back on the ways we've been taught to constantly shut it down.

Marcia: So where do we go from here? We can't just sit here idling with these idols.

Amy Kim: We keep moving! And the driver gets to DJ!

Soy Yo by Bomba Estéreo plays 0:40-0:48

(MMS and RRC start moving w/ AKKP) (RRC is passenger, MMS in back)

RRC: I like that song! Tell me more about it.

AKKP: It is called Soy Yo- it is a song all about owning who you are- the wonderful parts, the challenges and all that is still in process. This song moves me in opposition to idling. There is no way for me to be still when this is playing.

I know it is hard to believe but I have not always been the Amy Kim you know and have experienced. Can you imagine when I was little I did not like loud noises? I had to be taken out of large gatherings with lots of noise and now, many times I am part of that loud noise....

There are so many places where I have felt pressure to make myself as small as possible and certainly quiet. The expectations of white supremacy culture and acceptability have been an idol in my life. Understanding and identifying this dynamic has been a process. Now, I spend more time inviting my whole-self into the spaces I am in-without apology- it is a life-long practice.

Working for a predominantly white denomination can make it difficult for me to show up with my whole self. The last church I served was no exception. The congregation was wonderful and yet, they, like many, had unspoken expectations about how to show up. Express your feelings, but not too much. Too much emotion may make people uncomfortable and may cause people to see you as too emotional.

How has white supremacy culture demanded conformity as a way of being church? Feeling too vulnerable at church can be tough to navigate. How many of us have had those “disagreements” on the way to worship and immediately switch our behavior once we get out of the car? We code switch.

Code switching- has been defined as “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others”.

Yet every week and especially this week-the story of Holy week Easter is so raw and emotional.

It reminds me of Maundy Thursday of Holy week 2016. It was finally time for bed when I got a text from a young family that had just brought their new baby girl home. Something was very wrong and they said the Emergency Room was transporting their baby to the Cleveland Clinic.

I met them and their 3 year old daughter there. We sat in the waiting room while specialist after specialist made their way to this sweet baby and did all they could to diagnose what was causing her body to shut down.

After 24 hours of diagnosing and life saving measures the excruciating decision that there was no more that could be done was made. I along with the parents and the associate pastor held vigil with this family as they held this life gone way too soon... As they said their final goodbyes I was invited to hold this dear baby. This holy and horrible moment was unimaginable. It was Good Friday.

MMS: The prophet Isaiah says "They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

AAK: Easter Sunday arrived and I was not ready. He is Risen didn't feel right... The congregation didn't know what had transpired. I took a deep breath and shared the news with them. Continuing with worship I led the call to worship...Alleluias and He is Risen was said...but the refrain was this- Love is stronger than death... Over and over again this was our refrain. Love is stronger than death... with tears streaming my full self showed up. Spirit allowed me to minister and be ministered to - it was holy and horrible. Allowing ourselves space to BE right where we were- liberated the message of Resurrection.

RRC: "The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'"

MMS: "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."

RRC: "Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest."

AKKP: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

MMS: "But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves;"

RRC: "then he went home, amazed at what had happened."

AKKP: There is movement in the grief, confusion, surprise and emptiness of the tomb to unbelief and more processing. It had to be clunky and challenging to wrap your head around- and yet they remained with one another in the feelings and took the time to live into this new space... one full of holy possibility.

Upside down, inside out, off balance... anything but idling. You see, transformation is a dynamic process-we have to keep moving.

Colonization tells us that emotions can be out of control and discomfort will cause chaos. Resurrection reminds us that there is always room for all of us...the grief, the surprise, the anger and confusion- in life and in death.

RRC: Thank you for sharing that story, Amy Kim. It shows how resurrection doesn't have to fit into our expectations, and can happen alongside grief; it is a mystery that breaks the boundaries created by the watchful eye of colonization.

MMS: Yes, Amy Kim, it is a story of such sorrow and that sorrow brought a whole community into the power of resurrection's mystery. It seems like we're really getting somewhere now! We'll have resurrection sorted out in no time at this pace. Put the pedal to the medal, Amy Kim!

AKKP: Except it looks like there's some warning lights up ahead.

MMS: Oh no! Well it looks like we're going to be sitting here for a few minutes after all. Is this construction or an accident or what?

AKKP: It's hard to tell. Maybe this is a good time to stretch our legs and switch drivers, since we're really not moving right now anyway.

(pull over and get out and stretch)

RRC: Ugh, my feet are asleep. I could use some resurrection in my toes right now. Maybe You should drive again, Marcia, but I want to DJ now! Let's see, what might be appropriate?

Stuck in the Middle with you plays

MMS: Richard, now that I'm driving again, it gives me a chance to get back to what I was talking about earlier.

AKKP: You mean how excited you are about this road trip?

MMS: No...

RRC: Oh, you mean the joy of Easter morning?

MMS: No, you guys, I mean grief and dead bodies.

AKKP and RRC: (groan) Really, Marcia?!

RRC: Do we really need to go there right now, Marcia? I mean—it's a beautiful day, we all spent so much time building these sun-rays throughout the sanctuary.

I'm happy plays for a few seconds

MMS: Hear me out, if we are decolonizing resurrection, then we have to decolonize grief and death to get there. It doesn't mean we aren't happy. It means we are honest—you can feel joy and be truthful. Just think of all the ways we have been taught in supremacy culture that grief is not worth our time. Even the stages of grief by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, that started out as a way to encourage space and time for the way grief ebbs and flows and then it became some kind of grading system for how people grieve.

RRC: That's true. The 5 stages of grief started out as a way to really listen to people in the dying process. But it got taken over and turned into a prescription for the right way and only way to approach death.

AKKP: And most of the time, we don't even talk about death, we fear it, we try to deny that we are dying by denying that we are aging and that our bodies change.

MMS: Yes! If we are going to decolonize resurrection then we have to make space in our relationships for the mysteries of the way grief befriends us when we are experiencing loss and we have to make room for the sacredness of death.

It was an honor to be with my mom as she made her final transition. I can't explain and give words to all of it, but it was Holy and mysterious and so very real. I needed to be there. And now that she has crossed over I wonder about resurrection differently. I can feel my mom close in ways I didn't when she was alive. What does that mean?

And holding her hand for the last time and trying to memorize those hands one last time—the hands that had always been a given and picking out what she would wear when they took her body to be cremated—that was Holy.

RRC: Ok, I get where you are going. As we've colonized resurrection, we've also tried to reduce the mystery and sacredness of grief and death—and remove ourselves from those experiences.

AKKP: It makes me wonder where resurrection actually lives in all of the things we've tried to kill—not just Jesus, but emotion, uniqueness, grief, and the truth that dying is a part of living.

MMS: Maybe it's because my mom recently died or because I am getting ready to send Mary Elizabeth off to college, or maybe it's because I have embraced having gray hair—whatever it is, I feel death closer and I've been wondering about how we have to get more comfortable with it in order to be open to the promise of resurrection. Eternity is something we don't just experience when we die, it's something we live in and through and with every day.

God works through mystery and God works through the most mundane things to show us resurrection.

So, don't freak out you all, but one of the things that has really helped me with resurrection lately is compost.

(AKKP and RRC look at each other) AKKP and RRC: Compost?

RRC: I really did not see this coming.

AKKP: Me either. Should I say it? You know you all want me to say it! It's a Holy Shift!

MMS: Ok, ok. Yes, it is a Holy Shift. Away from all the ethereal, conjecturing that Christians do about what heaven is like. The truth is we don't really know what eternity is like. No matter what it is we think we can say about resurrection, the bottom line is that it is something we will never know in this world—we can't completely find resurrection in this world—when we are alive in this world death is always a possibility, always a part of every relationship we have with anything that is alive.

That's where the compost comes in. There is an emerging way to handle human remains that is called "recomposing." A woman named Katrina Spade took the idea from how farmers deal with livestock that have died. Katrina was looking for an earth-friendly way for humans who live in crowded urban areas to choose a burial that doesn't leave such a big carbon footprint.

She created a model for "recomposing" human remains that basically lets nature take its course. Our bodies know how to die. That's one of the most amazing things I witnessed with my mother's death. The hospice nurse told us, "the body takes care of itself in death" as systems start to shut down in a particular order.

Much like the reverse of birth, a dying body gears down and begins to find this new equilibrium point which is death. Once death occurs, the same microbes that exist on our bodies while we are alive begin to reframe their relationship to the body. With the help of plants and mulch and oxygen from the air, a human body breaks down in about 30 days and becomes organic matter—compost!

One human becomes a whole cubic yard of compost, that's a whole pick up truck load— our life expands out and grows in death, that compost is then added to the soil to grow trees and flowers and forests. And one of the main things the earth needs to thrive right now is more soil!

That feels like some hint of eternity to me—that somehow we are rejoined into this immediate and fused relationship with the very creation that supported us our whole lives. And then the cells and molecules that we are made of help to create and support more life. I know that's not exactly resurrection, but it helps me understand the intricacy and attention to detail that God sees to in the ways we belong to each other in life and in death.

Decolonizing the way resurrection has been captive to science—the science that says resurrection is not possible or that it is a ridiculous idea, an idle tale—well here we are coming full circle to the way science can actually give us a window into the molecular perfection of interdependence that persists in life and in death.

So whatever heaven is, it must mirror the amazing elegance of this world God created where nothing is wasted, nothing is truly lost. There is real freedom there, so that means there can be real freedom here, too.

AKKP: Yes, there is freedom in a community where we can be our full selves.

RRC: And freedom when we can wonder and we can honor the different ways people experience life and death in all the mystery and in all the unknowns.

MMS: And there is freedom in being at home in this world together—letting the way God made this world teach us about the way God makes and keeps eternity.

AKKP: I just realized something you all.

RRC: Is it that working in a church is the best job on earth?

MMS: Oh wait, I know it's that working in this church is the best job on earth!!

AKKP: It's kinda both things—but it's not as simple as it sounds. Working in a church is hard work—we all know that. But the beautiful thing is that working in a church means it's our job to invite others on this resurrection road trip everyday.

MMS: And when you stop and look around, Amy Kim and Richard, our resurrection road trip brings us right into the heart of who and what GCPC is seeking to be in the world today.

RRC: It's sorta like our life at GCPC is one big resurrection road trip!

Life is a Highway plays

MMS: Oh, I like that, Richard! It's like we are all Peter going to the tomb and looking in for ourselves. And Peter is amazed because he realizes no tomb can contain God's love.

RRC: That means God can break open all the tombs where we've tried to bury resurrection.

AKKP: And all the tombs where we try to bury our full humanity.

MMS: And all the tombs that Christianity has used to bury Jesus' liberation that will change the world.

All: He is risen, he is risen indeed!