

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

April 6, 2025

THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE GOSPEL

II Samuel 23: 13-17a; John 12: 1-8

The Oxford English Dictionary defines extravagance as “a going beyond the usual path.” The usual path, we know well. It’s doing just enough, satisfying the minimal requirements. And then there is extravagance-what goes well beyond the normal course. It’s the extra mile, maybe even the extra two miles. It’s merrymaking and loud laughter and an expensive engagement ring. It’s splurging with joy.

Some think extravagant acts are excessive, even sinful. Our Puritan ancestors thought so. Stay the course, keep in line, avoid excess. They followed the advice of Aristotle who advocated the “Golden Mean”, the path of moderation, the middle of the road. Not too much, not too little, not too high, not too low. The Greeks and the Puritans agreed; “Beware of extravagance.”

Now all of this is quite foreign to the Bible. The Scriptures are all about extravagance, the extravagant love of God for us. The Bible

is not advocating the “Golden Mean”. It considers the path of moderation as something akin to the lukewarm-neither hot nor cold. The Bible is really on the side of extravagance, those excessive, over-the-top deeds of mercy and love beyond what anyone would expect.

Our text from II Samuel illustrates what extravagance looks like. David, the King of Israel, was locked in bitter battle with his dreaded enemy, the Philistines. The Philistines had occupied David’s hometown of Bethlehem. Now on the run, David and his men were camped near the cave of Adullam, some twenty miles south of Jerusalem. The conditions were rough. No doubt the drinking water was sparse and bitter from the nearby creeks.

In a moment of nostalgia for his hometown, David blurts out longingly, “Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate.” Now it is hard to read David’s mind here. Is this, “Oh, to be in Bethlehem now that spring is here!” Or is this, “I wish we were all at the old watering hole like those by gone days!” Or just wishful thinking? We don’t know.

But we do know his young lieutenants took him quite literally. Three unknown young warriors, members of David’s bodyguard, understood their king’s desire for Bethlehem water as an implied command.

So these three young warriors rushed from the cave of Adullam and reached Bethlehem. They broke through the Philistine lines that encircled the town. No doubt, bloodshed ensued. These young men then drew water from the well at the gate of Bethlehem and hightailed it out of town. They transported that bucket of water like it contained treasure. Their booty was presented to the king like Magi presenting gold, frankincense and myrrh to a later Son of David.

Why did these three young men do what they did? Were they operating on the old notion, “Your wish is my command”? Or were they angling for a promotion? Or were they simply out of their minds, the kind of soldiers who volunteer only for the most dangerous mission? We don’t know why they undertook such an perilous mission.

But from the story of David, we can guess. David’s followers were deeply devoted to their king. They fought beside him repeatedly. They marched with him through thick and thin. One can only surmise that they risked their lives for only one reason-they loved David. That was motivation enough-love.

Now at this point in the story, we expect David to receive this extravagant gift with delight. Would he embrace his loyal followers? Toast his men’s bravery with a cup of water from the well of

Bethlehem? Award them with a medal of valor? But wait! Something seems out of place here. David refuses to drink the water from Bethlehem. Instead, David took the bucket of water and poured it out upon the ground. Come again?

Then David explains his outlandish act. “Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their own lives?” What a moment! David treated that water as though it contained the very life of these three young men. As though that water had turned to blood. They had risked everything to retrieve that water and so it had become too sacred and too holy merely to drink.

So David does what a priest would do. He ceremoniously poured the water onto the ground-a libation, a drink offering of water to the Lord. Typically oil or wine was poured out when animals were sacrificed as a thank offering. In pouring out the water David was saying, “I must give thanks for your bravery. Your lives are represented by this water. There are some things so precious that they must be given back to the Lord. So I offer this water as a thank offering to the Lord for your safe return.”

What a moment! David understood the meaning of sacrifice. Now David returns their gift to the Lord. He stands in awe of their

extravagance. He can only give back to the Lord what they had given to him. Here extravagance meets extravagance.

Likewise, our story from John's Gospel. It was three days before Jesus' death in Jerusalem. At the home of Lazarus, his dearly departed and now returned friend, Jesus shares a meal with this wonderful family. Mary and Martha feel immense gratitude to the One who brought their brother back from the tomb. But tension prevails as a death warrant hangs over the head of both Jesus and Lazarus.

During the meal Mary approaches their honored guest. She carries a pound of perfume made from pure nard. Perhaps it was a family heirloom, certainly it was costly. Then Mary does something extraordinary. She poured every ounce of this precious perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The fragrance filled the house with a delicate aroma, a scent fit for a king. It is a moment to savor, a moment of extravagant devotion.

But it was lost on Judas, who objected that the nard could have been sold to help the poor. Judas displays bad faith, since he simply wanted the cash, he, the dishonest treasurer. Now Jesus comes to Mary's defense once again. With the room filled with the splendor of costly perfume, Jesus says, "The poor you have with you always, but

you do not always have me.” Unbeknownst to Mary, she had anointed Jesus for burial. This was Mary’s way, her extravagant way, of preparing Jesus for a darkened tomb.

In that moment Jesus is the epitome of the poor man. He has no place to lay his head and only a cross for his future. In his poverty before his execution, Mary anoints the One who lived among the poor and will die among the poor. Mary anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair. These are the same feet that soon will be pierced with nails. Mary ‘s extravagant offering points forward to Jesus’ own extravagant self-offering. Here extravagance meets extravagance.

There are times when only extravagance is appropriate. Occasions when you pour a bucket of water upon the ground out of gratitude and a family heirloom upon the feet of a friend out of love. Anything less will not do. Lavish devotion. Lovely extravagance. That is what God is all about.

At this table extravagance is celebrated. Bread broken, the cup poured out, Jesus’ own life given for you. The extravagant love of God for you, just as you are. “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing, will be put in your lap.” Grace upon grace. Taste and see that this extravagant Lord is good indeed, Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

April 13, 2025

TO TELL THE TRUTH

Luke 19: 28-44

Israel had a passion for the truth. That's why the Ninth Commandment insists upon truthfulness. The Exodus version reflects a legal context where perjury is forbidden: "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a lying witness." The Deuteronomy version shows a wider concern for truth-telling in all aspects of life: "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a witness of emptiness." So either at court or in normal relationships, Israel set a high premium upon telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, literally, "so help me God."

During the last week of Jesus' ministry, good and decent people, in their anger against this itinerant preacher from

Nazareth, ran roughshod over the Ninth Commandment. First as “witnesses of emptiness” they spread lies and rumors and insults about Jesus. Then as “false witnesses” they committed perjury against Jesus both before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. That brought to a crescendo the many lies told about Jesus from day one of his ministry. Charges that he performed miracles because he was possessed by a demon or charges that he broke the Law of Moses-all lies.

During his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his supporters greeted him with “Hosanna”, waving their palm branches and spreading their garments before him. They welcomed him joyfully, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Because Jesus' opponents would not see the truth, they were blinded by a lie. They wanted to silence Jesus' supporters during the procession: "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" They became, in a word, "witnesses of emptiness", peddlers of a deadly deception. In response Jesus challenges their blindness: "I tell you if these were silent the very stones would cry out."

The truth will out; it must be heard. Every effort to suppress the truth is a lie and a cover-up. Jesus' triumphant entry boldly proclaims: "Let the truth ring out from the roof tops, that the King of Glory may come in. Jerusalem, this is the time of your visitation!"

Adolf Hitler in **Mein Kampf** wrote: "The great mass of people will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small

one.” The “big lie” against Jesus was that this donkey riding, table overturning militant, was an impostor, a false claimant to the throne of David. The many little lies led to the “big lie” before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

Accusers stepped forth and became “false witnesses”. They falsely charged that Jesus said he would “tear down the temple.” They perjured themselves against “the Way and the Truth and Life.” And yet, the Gospels tell us, almost in disbelief, these perjurors could not even coordinate their lies. “For many bore false witness against him and their witness did not agree.” Ah yes, the web of deceit is often a tangled web indeed.

The “big lie” continued when the religious leaders, the guardians of the Ninth Commandment, carried their

baseless accusations before Pilate. The splendor that was Rome resided essentially in her legal system, her ostensible concern for equity and justice. And yet in the governor's palace in Jerusalem perjury prevailed. Falsely accusing Jesus of political insurrection, one lie followed another.

Is it any wonder that Pilate, perhaps exasperated with all the false testimony, blurts out, "What is truth?" Who could discern any truth in this jumble of charges? I have a friend who once served as a prosecutor. She said to me, "After awhile, you come to think that the only time people lie is when they open their mouth."

How many lies had Pilate endured, the "small lies" and the "big lies"? Here the "big lie" triumphed. Perjury against Jesus meant quite simply death. And the "big lie" continued

even afterwards when some claimed that Jesus' disciples stole his body from the tomb. Lies led to Jesus' unjust execution and lies defamed him even after his burial.

For Christians, then, the issue of truthfulness is of paramount importance, most poignantly during Holy Week. In her book **Lying-Moral Choice in Public and Private Life** Sissela Bok traces the three major consequences of lying and deception. First, their impact upon us personally. Second, how lies impact our relationships with others. Third, how deception affects our relationship with God.

Lying, first of all, hurts oneself. The lie causes a loss of face, a loss of self-esteem. The word “integrity” comes from the same roots for “intact” and “untouched”. Something deep within us is damaged when we lie. It is painful to

admit, “I too can lie.” Sometimes we discover it is easy to tell a lie, but hard to tell only one. We resort to shoring up our first lie and then become anxious lest it be uncovered. After such careful cultivating of the lie, we then have to admit, “I too am a liar.” The harm to our souls is immense when we succumb to deceit and deception. Peter found out the hard way when the cock crowed after his third denial.

Lying, secondly, directly impacts other people and sometimes the whole community. Augustine famously said, “When regard for the truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.” Lies destroy the network of trust between people.

When I was in seminary I spent the summer of 1973 in Washington, D.C. as a student chaplain. I ended up

spending a good deal of time attending the Watergate hearings in the Senate office building. I saw and heard lies big and small that would ultimately bring down the Nixon administration. The parade of perjured witnesses was astonishing and appalling. I have never forgotten that summer. Seems like these days we are seeing a replay of those unsettling days of yore.

I am reminded that Samuel Johnson once said that even the devils themselves do not lie to one another, since the Society of Hell could not exist without truth any more than other societies. Can our society exist when after hearing any newscast or reading any newspaper we are forced to ask, “Who is lying in this story?” Troubling times, for sure.

Jesus wept as he considered that Jerusalem embraced a “big lie” about him. “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.” Believing the “big lie” about Jesus led to disastrous consequences for the City of David. Lies have destroyed many communities. The “big lie” still has disastrous consequences for our community and our nation.

Lying, thirdly, deeply impacts our relationship with our God, the Lord of truth. To live a lie is to undermine our journey of faith. It leaves us lost and confused. Too often we tell ourselves lies about our true condition, so we try to deceive ourselves. Only the truth, the whole truth, can bring us healing. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God

who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The truth about ourselves leads to repentance and confession leads to renewal and joy and peace. From the cross we hear yet again Jesus’ words of grace and truth, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” We come to know ourselves as we truly are-sinners saved by God’s grace alone.

Here is what Holy Week calls us to be and do. We are called to tell the truth, to live the truth, and proclaim the truth about God’s grace in Jesus our Lord. Paul says it so well, “Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth to their neighbor, for we are members of one another.” And he also says, “Speak the truth in love.” It is all

about integrity and wholeness, lining up your life with what you say you believe. And trusting always this promise of Jesus: “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Friends in Christ, Holy Week is a clarion call for truthfulness. Being truthful to ourselves, with one another, and most especially with our God. Deception and falsehood are ruled out. Only the truth will make us free, truly free in Christ. “For freedom, Christ has set you free.” Yes and amen!

Thanks be to God!

Rancho Presbyterian

April 20, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

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AND JESUS LAUGHED

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Paul reminds the Corinthian congregation of those who saw the resurrected Christ. He names people we know so well-Peter, James, the Twelve and Paul himself. All superstars of the early church. Almost as an aside, Paul reminds them of the five hundred or so folks who also witnessed the Risen Christ. We do not know who these folks were or where this resurrection appearance happened. Perhaps it occurred somewhere near Jerusalem-we just don't know.

So let's ask this question: how would five hundred folks react to the appearance of One who had been executed, buried and mourned? But who now was standing right before them? Would they applaud politely? Would they whisper in muffled tones, "Why he looks better than we've ever seen him?" Would they try to keep the children quiet so as not to distract from their neighbor's quiet devotion? I rather doubt it.

I suspect that five hundred plus folks who had been crushed by Jesus' crucifixion would've been simply elated to see him again. My

guess is that those assembled rose to their feet clapping their hands and shouting out for sheer delight. This of all events in history deserved a standing ovation. For sure!

Wouldn't you have jumped for joy? Wouldn't you have hugged your neighbor and broken into that song "up from the grave he arose"? I think all Rio of us would have. The Gospel of John, in a huge understatement, says that when the disciples saw the Risen Lord they "rejoiced". The resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the "laughing of the redeemed". A knee slapping exultation that proclaims, "I can hardly believe my eyes!" Those five hundred souls would've joined with the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven to celebrate God's sweet victory over sin and death. Can I get a Hallelujah, sisters and brothers!

So the serious gloom of Good Friday and the melancholy sadness of Holy Saturday gave way to the joyous delight of Easter day. Five hundred troubled souls converted into a glad community of hope. There is only good cheer, for Christ has indeed overcome the world. The old hymn captures the moment so well, "For gladness breaks like morning whenever Thy face appears!"

Now the title of this sermon is borrowed from Eugene O'Neil's 1926 play entitled, "Lazarus Laughed." O'Neil depicts Lazarus a few days

after Jesus had brought his friend back from the grave. Lazarus is in his home in Bethany which has been renamed, “The House of Laughter.” Why? Because a moment after Lazarus came up from the tomb, he looked into Jesus’ smiling eyes and as O’Neil writes, he “began to laugh like a man in love with God.”

When questioned by his friends and family, Lazarus laughs as he remembers the moment his burial mask was removed from his face. In that moment of light Lazarus exclaimed, “I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart. And my heart, reborn to love of life, cried ‘Yes’ and I laughed the laughter of God.” Then O’Neil in his stage notes tells us that “Lazarus begins to laugh, softly at first, a laugh so full of complete acceptance of life, like a great bird triumphant in the skies, uplifted by love.”

And all around Bethany people begin to chant, “Lazarus laughs. Our hearts grow happy. The wind laughs. The sea laughs. Lazarus laughs.” Then Lazarus responds, “Laugh with me. Death is defeated. Fear no more. There is only life, only laughter!” My, what a scene!

Well, you do not have to be resuscitated from a sealed grave to laugh like Lazarus. But it helps to be reborn. Take for instance, Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and spiritual writer. In his lovely spiritual autobiography **The Sacred Journey** Buechner describes the joy

of his rebirth in Christ. In 1953 he was living in New York City. Things were not going well for this young, would-be writer whose novels were not selling. He had fallen in love with a woman who had not fallen in love with him.

So out of sheer desperation one Sunday morning Buechner attended a Presbyterian church for two very curious reasons. First, the church happened to be down the street from his apartment. Second, he had nothing much better to do on that lonely Sunday morning. Now Buechner's honesty should give us pause about judging the motive as to why anyone attends worship. On any given Sunday, God will take us for whatever reason we show up!

The Presbyterian minister's name at that church was George Buttrick, a truly great preacher. Buechner was enchanted with this pulpit master whose one particular phrase in one particular sermon changed the course of his life. A phrase, by the way, that was adlibbed, not in the printed sermon. Buttrick said that Jesus is crowned king in the hearts of all his followers and that coronation takes place among "confession and tears and great laughter." That phrase did it for Buechner.

After the sermon Buechner had a huge lump in his throat as he walked down the street to meet his grandmother for lunch. All that had

been secretly fermenting all those years of his journey came to focus on that one phrase: “confession and tears and great laughter.” All his hopes to believe were touched by that one throw away line. In all his subsequent writing Buechner remained a witness to the power of that one phrase.

In his book **Telling the Truth-The Gospels as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale** Buechner says that “the tragic is inevitable. The comic is the unforeseeable.” How could a bored and lonely young writer in New York City foresee that an ad libbed preacher’s phrase “confession and tears and great laughter” would change the course of his life? The crucifixion was the inevitable. The Good News of Jesus’ unexpected resurrection from the dead is the comic. The Divine Comedy that elicits “glad tears at last, not sad tears, but tears at the hilarious unexpectedness of things rather than at their tragic expectedness.”

Many have discovered that God’s antics often take us by surprise. Take Carl Samra who in his book **The Joyful Christ** describes how his tears were turned into great laughter. In the early eighties Samra at the age of fifty was in the very depths of depression, a severe mid-life crisis. His marriage, his job and his health were all in shambles. So he took off from Michigan for Phoenix, hoping that the warm sunshine would cheer him up. But he only got worse. He wrote, “I was full of bitterness and

anger and self-hatred, fear and doubt. An urge to be finished with my pain overwhelmed me one day.”

So Samra went to a hardware store and bought some rope. Totally despondent he drove all over Phoenix looking for a tree from which to hang himself. Have you ever looked for a good hanging tree in Phoenix? He found that the palm trees were much too tall to climb and all the other trees were little more than bushes. So he drove out into the desert and saw hundreds of saguaros, those giant cactus plants. Staring at them for hours he tried to figure out how to hang himself. Just how do you hang yourself from a giant cactus plant?

Finally, it became ridiculously apparent to him why he couldn’t. He simply could not figure out how to climb its trunk without getting his fingers pricked with thorns. At that point he knew he was not that serious about hanging himself.

So this discouraged, self-destructive middle-aged man got into his car and drove around Phoenix looking for a more pain-free way to end his life. Being from Michigan he looked for a river to jump into. Have you ever looked for a river in Phoenix? So with neither a hanging tree nor a river in which to end it all, Samra simply gave up. Driving along a random street he stopped in front of the Franciscan Renewal Center, a retreat house. He went into the chapel and got on his knees and began

to pray. He prayed for the strength to endure his terrible pain for another day.

While he was praying a Franciscan priest by the name of Gavin Griffth came into the chapel. Griffth was a warm-hearted Irish wit who grew up wanting to be a stand-up comedian. He saw Samra in distress and invited him for a meal in the dining room. Samra reluctantly accepted. Following the priest into the kitchen, Samra saw it hanging on the wall, his first ever exposure to this famous painting. It was a picture of the laughing Christ. ‘

That picture did it. That was all he needed to see, a picture of Christ making merry. And he began to cry and cry, but then he began to laugh. He could hardly contain himself. Tears of joy, laughter that lifted his spirits. Laughter that surged up in him a deep desire to live again, to love again, to be well again. So out of his tears came great laughter. Out of Samra’s great sorrow has come great laughter ever since.

Sisters and brothers, I believe that Christ wants to stand in the midst of his people, whether with his old friend Lazarus, or with someone just wandering into a Presbyterian church, or with someone who is looking for a pain free way to end their life. Christ wants to stand in the midst of us today. To gather with all those who need some merriment in their lives, who need to learn to laugh again. Our Risen

Lord wants to stand in the midst of us this glorious Easter morning to inspire the laughing of the redeemed. Through “tears and great laughter” we would hear the laughter of Jesus arising even in our own hearts. So be of good cheer, my friends! He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

April 27, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

QUESTIONS HAVE ARISEN

Luke 24: 1-12

This past week I did a Google search for the best questions from the Bible. I found a bunch of great questions, divided between those from God, from humans, and from Jesus. Here are my favorites from God: “Where are you? What is this that you have done? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Whom shall I send? Son of Man, can these bones live?”

And humans ask some pretty good questions as well: “Am I my brother’s keeper? Are you here for such a time as this? What is truth? What must I do to be saved? If God is for us, who can be against us?” And so does Jesus: “Who do you say that the Son of Man is? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? What good is it to gain the whole world but lose your soul? Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?”

All outstanding questions. But perhaps my favorite question in the Bible is not asked by God or a human or Jesus. It is asked by an angel. It comes from our text in Luke 24. A question arose for Mary

Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women early that Easter morning. Standing before an empty tomb with spices in their hands, they encounter two angelic beings in dazzling clothes.

This is not exactly what they expected. They had rather mournfully expected to anoint the lifeless, scarred body of Jesus, their teacher and their friend. Now they find themselves fact to face with messengers from God. And these messengers raise a stunning question for them: “Why do you seek for the living among the dead?” Only Luke’s Gospel gives us this question that goes unanswered.

Now I can imagine some answers these faithful women could have offered had their hearts not been in their throats. They might have replied, “This is where we saw Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus’ body and we came to anoint him as is our custom.” Or they could have replied simply, “This is what friends do for a fallen friend.” But the women could not find an answer for the angels. Instead, they run to tell Peter and the disciples what happened. Was that question still ringing in their eyes as they ran?

I want us to think about that angelic question and what it means for us. It seems to me that whenever God begins something new, there are always questions. At the dawn of creation God asked

Adam the very first question, “Where are you?” Now at the dawn of a new creation the angels ask the women, “Why do you seek for the living among the dead?” Or to paraphrase them, “Why are you here?” Whenever God begins a new work, we are asked, “Where are you? Why are you here?” That implies that we are accountable, that we can respond. Responsiveness—that is what God asks of us.

We as God’s children need to answer this fundamental question again and again, “Why do you seek for the living among the dead?” Why do we look for meaning in things that are so fleeting, so inconsequential, things that do not last? Why this strange fascination with what Ecclesiastes calls “vanity” or “emptiness”? Koholeth the preacher lines out all the things that are finally mere emptiness: wealth, fame, power, pleasure, even knowledge. And this ancient wisdom calls it vanity, chasing an illusion. We would call it grasping at straws.

This question puzzled St. Augustine as well. In his Autobiography he described his own wandering youth as constantly “licking the dust.” Mindlessness held him in its grip and so his whole being was devoted to tasting what cannot satisfy or give ultimate meaning. That’s “licking the dust”, an absurd attachment to lifelessness.

So exactly why do we seek for the living among the dead? Perhaps because we have a distorted conception of reality. We assume that reality is only what our five senses can access-what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. So we clutch for what is within our grasp, hoping to allay our anxiety and fear. We cling tightly to money and security, to pleasure and experiences. Even though deep in our hearts, we know it is like trying to hold water in our hands.

That is why the angels question the women at the tomb. That's why questions have always arisen from the tomb, questions about our intentions and our focus. Like facing the lifeless body of Pope Francis-we are forced to think of our own mortality. Such questions, deep questions, always arise. Like, what am I doing with my life, my gifts, my opportunities? Why do I hold onto certain things so tightly? Do I really think that all those fleeing things will save me? Why do I seek for the living among the dead?

The angels knew something the women did not. Christ is risen so their spices are unnecessary. Everything they brought to the tomb was pointless. "He is not here. He is risen!" Death no longer holds him. He lives-that is what the women hear from the angels. The best news the world has ever heard.

Now the ultimate reality is not death and loss. The ultimate reality is life and hope and love. That is the ultimate reality-the power of the resurrection. Anything that disregards this amazing affirmation is mere vanity, chasing after the wind, licking the dust. In Christ the risen Lord the women discover what they could not have imagined-life, abundant life, life that is life indeed.

In 1988 I was serving University Presbyterian Church in Austin. During Holy Week something terrible happened to our church keyboardist Esma Beth Clark. Her beautiful home overlooking the Colorado River burned to the ground. In Esma Beth's home were many priceless pictures and plaques and paintings. But none was more treasured than her grand piano. Here she practiced for countless hours the music that brought such joy to all of us in worship.

When I got word about Esma Beth's house, I quickly drove over to see her. Many church members had already gathered to comfort her. I hugged Esma Beth and told her how very sorry I was. Then Esma Beth took me by the hand and we walked out onto the soggy ashes. She reached over and sifted through the ash that covered her grand piano. She poked at the charred piano wire and looked at me. Then she said something to me that I will never forget. It was so

matter-of-fact: “Why do I seek for the living among the dead?” Like the women at the tomb, I was speechless. And then we held each other and cried.

But this story does not end in the ashes. For the next year two parallel processes were at work. First, Esma Beth began the laborious process of rebuilding her home. And secondly, the wonderful choir members at University Presbyterian Church began raising money for a new grand piano—the part not covered by the insurance, which was considerable. They put on several fund raisers, all for Esma Beth. There were concerts and shows and bake sales. Countless acts of generosity and love. For a full year this labor of love continued. It was the year of Esma Beth.

And so during Holy Week of 1989 the members of the choir held a party at Esma Beth’s newly constructed home. In this celebration marked with songs and skits, the choir presented to Esma Beth her new grand piano. It was one of the happiest church parties ever. The highlight of the party was Esma Beth sitting down at her new grand piano. She played what she was practicing for Easter morning: “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”. And everyone sang with gusto and great joy. At the end of this glorious celebration Esma

Beth pulled me aside and whispered to me in her matter-of-fact way: “He is risen!” “Yes,” I said, “He is risen indeed!”

Thanks be to God. Amen.