

People Get Ready
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023, 9:00 & 11:15 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Curtis Mayfield began writing songs at age 12 ... about the same time that he and his family moved into the Cabrini-Green housing project in the Near North Side of Chicago.

Now for Curtis, faith was truly the essence of things hoped for, the conviction of that which is not seen ... because Cabrini-Green was the place where hope went to die, or at least slept so long people forgot what she looked like.

Now if you haven't heard of Cabrini-Green, that's OK, because certainly just about everyone who ever lived there wishes they could forget it, too. Cabrini-Green, St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe and our own Jordan Downs in South LA were politicians', bankers' and developers' attempts to encode segregation into public housing policy.

At its height, more than 15,000 people crammed into the more than 3,000 apartments in 23 Cabrini-Green towers in a concentration of poverty and despair that drew comparisons to the Warsaw Ghetto. And just as similar conditions in Jordan Downs fueled the uprisings in Watts, Cabrini Green became the icon of what Dr. King called worse institutionalized racism than he ever saw in Mississippi and Alabama.

And yet Curtis Mayfield had faith. And his faith echoed through his music ... and it was not the faith of certainty. Far from it.

"My songs always came from questions that I need answers for," Curtis said.

Curtis refused to believe the way things were was the way things had to remain – despite all the evidence to the contrary. He lived by those words of Dr. King, "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

And in the towers of Cabrini-Green, he needed faith to even see that first step because the staircases were too often the places of nightmares not the pathway to dreams. One of his earliest songs, "Keep on Pushing" became an anthem of early civil rights activists, all of them together singing a new world into being without knowing exactly how it was going to happen.

Now maybe some day
I'll reach that higher goal
I know that I can make it
With just a little bit of soul
And it don't make sense
Not to keep on pushin'

And then came the March on Washington, and Curtis Mayfield felt something. Something he had never felt before. It was one of the several catalytic events that gave wings to his hope that things could change ... he didn't know how, but he became convinced that things could change. That the life he had known wasn't the only life there was. That a moment was coming ... a moment of liberation. A moment that was not grounded in certainty but in possibility.

And so, he wrote a song that became what Dr. King called the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. A song that Bob Marley incorporated into his own anthem, "One Love." A song we just heard this morning.

(Jason and Dorothy sing) *People get ready, there's a train a-comin.
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.*

"Now it was the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came, early on while it was still dark, to the tomb and saw the stone removed from the tomb."

What if we had the courage to end the story right there.

Before any explanation.

Before any doctrine had a chance to form over which we would spend thousands of years fighting.

Before wonderings had a chance to calcify into interpretations and then concretize into dogma.

What if we had the courage just to experience the event without needing to explain the event. To stand at the mouth of the empty tomb in wonder and in fear and let it be ok for us not to know what it's all about. Not sure what it means save that something has happened here.

Something that holds in its hands not certainty but possibility.

Possibility that things as they have been don't need to be the way they remain.

That the force of love might be able to topple empires ... and that the death we have always feared might not be the ultimate power it has always claimed to be.

What if instead of meeting the empty tomb with an explanation that invites us to divide one another into groups of insiders and outsiders based on whether we can make some statement of belief of what actually happened and what it really meant ... what if instead we embrace it as it truly was and not as the Gospel authors tried to retrofit a theology into it in the telling.

Embrace it as it was ... a moment of confusion and possibility. A moment like any potentially revolutionary moment that holds both terror and hope.

Inviting us to take a first step without knowing for sure the rest of the staircase is there.

What if instead of creating a doctrinal test – do you believe in the resurrection ... do you believe that “Jesus died and rose again for your sins?” ... what if instead we hear a chorus on the wind, inviting us to join with ancestors and friends yet unmet in singing a new world into being.

Inviting us to join a movement that has been moving since the beginning of creation.

A movement of love and justice that has refused to die no matter what the world throws against it.

Inviting us to join a movement that has no insiders and outsiders. No true believers and false prophets. No doctrinal tests designed to consolidate power and use shame to cast out.

What if instead of Jesus appearing and neatly answering the questions that Mary and the other disciples had, instead the wind carries a song to our ears ... one that invites us not to create more things that divide us but instead to set them aside in love.

A song that invites everyone into God’s movement of liberation.

What if instead of Jesus appearing and neatly answering the questions that Mary and the other disciples had, instead Mary and you and me and all of us stand at the empty tomb and hear a refrain that is a call to arms of loving...

Can you hear it...

(Jason, very softly) *People get ready, there’s a train a-comin.*

At first it is so soft, we might think it is a trick of the ear or the mind. And so, we get really quiet ... and we listen again.

(Jason, again, very softly) *People get ready, there’s a train a-comin.*

Paul Simon sings “everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance. Everybody thinks is true.”

And that’s what we hear ... standing at the mouth of the tomb, with the stone rolled away. We can hear it and it is a sound of promise and hope. And the sound is getting closer ... and louder

(Jason and Dorothy, a little louder) *People get ready, there’s a train a-comin.*

And we start to wonder as the song gets louder and the train gets closer.

Maybe I don't have to have the right answer.

Maybe I don't need to know what all this means.

And even more ... maybe I can let go of some of this baggage I've been carrying around.

My need to be right.

My need for others to be wrong.

My need to have all the answers.

My need to be sure.

And as the wind blows, we hear the song getting louder and the train getting closer, and we can start to make out even more of the words.

(Jason and Dorothy with Russ playing ... singing louder)

People get ready, there's a train a-comin.

You don't need no baggage, you just get on board

All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'

Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.

Yes, that's it.

We are together at the empty tomb, and it is a moment ...and it is a movement.

And it's not about having the right interpretation or the right doctrine ... it's about allowing ourselves to embrace the possibility that how things are isn't how they have to be.

It is the eternal song of God's spirit of love. It is the song that rang out from that empty tomb that Sunday morning in Palestine and was strong enough to reach into Curtis Mayfield's bedroom in Cabrini Green where he lay sleeping with his guitar.

It is the song that became Keep on Pushing.

It is the song that became Yo Soy Chicano

It is the song that became I Will Survive and Blindfold my Eyes and Cover the Sky;

Redemption Song and One Love.

Because Easter is not about whether you can say for sure what happened at that empty tomb and what it means.

Easter is about can you hear the music?

Can you hear the song on the wind that invites all of us to join the movement of love that comes from ancient of days.

A movement that has often been battered but has never been defeated.

A movement where you don't need no baggage or ticket ... just enough imagination and faith to believe that the power of one love is enough not only to empty a tomb on Easter morning but to heal all the brokenness in your life, in our life and in this world we share.

Because now is the time.

It might not feel like it.

It might feel like things are moving in exactly the wrong direction.

It might feel like we are more unjust and divided than ever and that justice and unity is a long, long way off.

It might even feel like some mornings there isn't even a good reason to get out of bed.

I've gotta believe that's how Mary Magdalene felt that first Easter morning.

Jesus is dead ... all hope is lost ... why should I even get out of bed?

And yet she did.

And because she did, she heard that song of hope

And because she heard it

And not because she believed it but because she just allowed for the possibility that it might be true, Jesus' movement of love did not end but continued.

Because it's not about having the right answer ... or being a member of the right church ... or even the right religion. It's about being able to hear the music on the wind, it's about being able to hear the train a-comin' and to have enough faith, to have enough hope in the power of love to just get on board.

So this morning, I'm not asking you if you have the answers

... I'm asking you "can you hear the music?"

I'm not asking you "do you believe in the resurrection?"

I'm asking you "Are you ready to join the movement?"

This morning, I'm not asking you to subscribe to some false idea of worthiness through purity. That way only leads to judgment and death. And we have had way too much of that.

No ... what I'm saying this morning is
Can you hear the music?
Are you ready to join the movement?
Because what I'm saying this morning is...

(Jason, Dorothy, Russ and I sing)
People get ready, there's a train a-comin.
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.

One more time Everybody sing.

People get ready, there's a train a-comin.
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.

One love.
One heart
Let's get together and feel all right

One love.
One heart
Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right.
Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right.

People get ready, there's a train a-comin.
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.