

**Blackbiird Fly**  
**Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024, 11:15 a.m.**  
**All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

**[following Beyonce's "Blackbiird" played in church:]**

Since we've already sung our Alleluias "unto Christ, our heavenly King" ... I thought it might be good to give the Queen some airtime. You may be seated.

Melba Pattillo

Ernest Green

Elizabeth Eckford

Minnijean Brown

Terrence Roberts

Carlotta Walls

Jefferson Thomas

Gloria Ray

Thelma Mothershed

Say their names.

Before September 4, 1957, you never would have known who they were ... and maybe you don't know who they are today, and if you don't, you're not alone. I had to look them up.

Before September 4, 1957, they were just nine black teenagers living in a world that neither acknowledged their potential nor afforded them the opportunity to make a difference. A world not as different as we might think from today.

We change our name but not the ways we play pretend.

And yet on September 4, 1957, 24 hours after a federal judge's order, they tried to walk into previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, only to be stopped by a vicious mob and the Arkansas National Guard.

Sixteen days later, a federal judge ordered the National Guard to stand down and Melba, Ernest, Elizabeth, Minnijean, Terrence, Carlotta, Jefferson, Gloria and Thelma once again tried to enter Central High School – this time through a side door.

This time, they got to attend school for three hours before the mob tried to break into the school to lynch them, and the principal sent them home.

Finally, two days later, on September 25, 1957, President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, sent the Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to join them so these black teenagers

who had become known as the Little Rock Nine were finally able to do this ordinary thing that took extraordinary effort and courage ... attend school for a full day.

Melba, Ernest, Elizabeth, Minnijean, Terrence, Carlotta, Jefferson, Gloria and Thelma.

It is too easy to miss the extraordinary power and beauty, the very image of God that lies in and on every human being.

It is too easy to dismiss those among us whose value is apart from the wealth, power and charisma the world values, in a world where the package we are wrapped in doesn't match the package the world adores, in a world where productivity and function too often define us and reduce and limit others and ourselves to that definition.

And yet when we are reduced, limited and dismissed ... we feel it. We know what it is like to be seen as inconsequential, or less than ... or "just another"

Just another homeless person.

Just another woman.

Just another undocumented immigrant.

Just another black teenager.

Just another hashtag.

If it happens all the time to us, we can start to believe it.

We can internalize the lie of our own worthlessness and even amplify it to avoid conflict and gain a sliver of acceptance in a world not designed for us. We become understandably complicit in our own dehumanization, and even advocates for it.

If it happens occasionally, we can build up resiliency, learn to stand up. Learn to find others like us who help us to see the beauty and power in ourselves and even take pride in our blackness or brownness, our queerness and trans-ness, our youth or our increasing age, our femaleness or non-binaryness, our indigenous heritage, Asian roots or the wheelchair or cane we use.

If you're like me and it hardly ever happens to you, if and when it does, the pin prick can feel like a knife wound ... and we can either accept the invitation to empathy with those made invisible all the time ... or wail so loudly our cries drown out all the rest.

Whatever our experience, there is something deep in us that knows that each one of us and every human being is created in God's image, with infinite beauty, power and creative potential. Something inside of each of us that knows that it is offensive for us to be erased and dismissed.

Something inside of us that knows no matter how broken our wings and sunken our eyes, we are only waiting for our moment to arise, we are only waiting for our moment be free.

In 1968, just weeks after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul McCartney had the Little Rock Nine on his heart as he wrote Blackbird. He would later say, "this

was really a song from me to a black woman, experiencing these problems in the States: ‘Let me encourage you to keep trying, to keep your faith, there is hope.’”

This week, in the dead of night as Maundy Thursday turned into Good Friday, Beyoncé did Sir Paul one better, dropping the cover we just heard.

The Queen didn’t just tell, she showed.

Reclaiming a country music genre that black artists helped create and then were systemically excluded from, Beyoncé not only sang this beautiful version of Blackbird, she used it to amplify the voices of four amazing young, black country music artists – a phrase that many think is an oxymoron. Four artists that, like those Little Rock Nine, I didn’t know the names of until I was forced to look them up because I was enraptured by the beauty of their voices.

Tanner Adell

Tiera Kennedy

Reyna Roberts

Brittney Spencer

Say their names, too.

They recorded their tracks individually and didn’t know they were on the album until the track list was released on Wednesday and didn’t hear the song until they heard themselves singing in the dead of night Friday morning when the song dropped.

They are no more gifted or courageous or powerful than they were 48 hours ago, but thanks to Beyoncé being able to see and amplify who they are, we now know who they are and their impact on the music world is poised to take a giant leap.

Sometimes all it takes is to notice someone or to be noticed for the unique, beautiful, powerful person we are.

Sometimes all it takes is to treat someone like the image of God they have always been, to recognize the image of God that has rested on them all along and help them find the wings to fly.

It doesn’t have to happen on a worldwide album drop. It can happen anywhere, anytime.

You were only waiting for this moment to arise.

Magdalene was a beautiful, powerful and courageous image of God. We know she was courageous because John’s Gospel tells us she came to the tomb “while it was still dark.”

Our sister Becca Stevens reminds us:

“it’s worth noting that night is especially scary for women. It is especially scary when violence has been perpetrated already and the occupying forces are still present, as is true for Magdalene and her friends. They had witnessed not forty eight hours before the state

execution of their rabbi and were threatened by soldiers. This danger is also true for many women from many cultures. The common theme I have heard over decades is that night is the time to hide. It is the time when shadows play havoc on nerves and when desperate people do desperate things....

Becca continues, "Magdalene ... walks along a dark garden path.... part of an ancient parade of women who have gotten up and walked after the fear that the violence this world imposes on them causing them to want to huddle in darkness. The walk feels like an act of defiance in line with countless women heroes who have said, 'You can't kill hope.'"

And we know the story. She finds the empty tomb and runs and gets the men, who come and, fairly inexplicably, then leave, leaving Mary with tears streaming out of her sunken eyes.

And then something incredible happens. Not just the angels who appear and ask her why she is weeping, but even more what happens next.

John's Gospel says, "she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Mary turned and saw Jesus but she did not know it was Jesus standing there. John's Gospel says she thought he was the gardener.

Now being a gardener is a very specific thing. You don't wear fine clothes to be a gardener. You carry special tools when you are a gardener.

John's Gospel says that Magdalene doesn't recognize it being Jesus, that she thought he was the gardener ... but here's the thing ... John's Gospel never says she was mistaken.

John's Gospel never says, "actually, it wasn't the gardener, it was Jesus" ... as if Jesus could never have been the gardener.

It is we who traditionally make that assumption.

Magdalene thought Jesus was the gardener ... because Jesus was the gardener.

Think about it.

Why wouldn't Jesus be the gardener? Isn't it natural that the Jesus who was born as an illegal migrant and quickly became a refugee should first appear as a day laborer?

But even Magdalene, who had been erased and dismissed and treated as a "just another woman" even just minutes before by the male disciples, fell into the trap of only looking for Jesus in a comfortable, familiar form. That's how easy it is for all of us.

This ain't Scooby Doo.

Jesus didn't pull off a mask like Old Man Withers at the abandoned amusement park and reveal himself.

Jesus was who he always was.

Jesus is who he always is.

The one who is sick or in prison that craves a visit.

The one who is hungry and thirsty who longs for a sip or a bite to eat.

Jesus is who he always is... and yet even today we erase him from the story until we can picture him the way we prefer to picture him.

And it's not as a gardener.

Miguel de la Torre, in his amazing book The Politics of Jesus, says:

*"The oppressed of the world occupy the space of Holy Saturday, the day after Friday's crucifixion, and the not yet Easter Sunday of resurrection. This is a space where some faint anticipation of Sunday's Good News is easily drowned out by the reality and consequences of Friday's violence and brutality. It is a space where hopelessness becomes the companion of used and abused people. The virtue and/or audacity of hope become a class privilege experienced by those protected from the realities of Friday or the opium that is used to numb that same reality until Sunday rolls around. Regardless of the optimism professed, the disenfranchised, their children, and their children's children will more than likely continue to live in an ever-expanding poverty. Sunday seems so far away. Waiting, esperando, becomes tiresome. The situation remains hopeless."*

And then finally, Jesús says Maria's name. And in that moment of connection, that moment of recognition of her humanity, Maria is able to see Jesus for who he is. The gardener and so much more.

Torre writes: "for those who are invisible, salvation becomes their transformation from nonpersons to personhood."

Jesús wasn't mistaken for the gardener. Jesús was and is the gardener. And what are the consequences of that for us today?

What are the relational consequences?

What are the economic consequences?

What are the consequences in terms of access to opportunity?

What are the consequences in terms of how we treat the gardeners among us who are Christ in many forms, including at times in the mirror.

Torre writes:

*"Liberals may express, with teary eyes, guilt over the plight of the marginalized, but all too often it is done from the comfort of financial and sociopolitical security, unaware of their own complicity with oppressive social structures, while arrogantly professing to understand the disenfranchised social location. Fortunately, Hispanics have a Jesús who knows what it means to be consigned to the economic margins of society, for Jesucristo was also counted among the poor."*

What are the consequences of Jesús being the gardener when too often we sing “take these broken wings and learn to fly” while the feet that broke the wings are still standing on them?

At this reunion in the garden, Jesús is who he always is.

And Maria is who she always is.

They are Blackbirds singing in the dead of night, with broken wings and sunken eyes ... and in their recognition of each other the moment they have been waiting for arises and they can fly and be free.

As this Lent began on Ash Wednesday, our dear friend and brother Larry Gonzalez - who used to sit right over their under the red balloon that has settled like the nativity star over where he and Jim sat every Sunday – as Lent began, Larry passed out of this world and into the resurrection we celebrate this morning.

My favorite story about Larry is of when he took friends to Milan years after he had worked there and decided to walk with his friends to show them the Gucci office where he used to work as a major player in the fashion industry.

As Larry approached – and this was years after he had worked there – the doorman saw him from a distance and shouted with joy like a father welcoming home the prodigal son:

“Lorenzo!” the doorman rejoiced.

“Luigi!” Larry exclaimed!

And the two embraced.

The joy of that encounter was real. Not just for the two of them but for everyone within ear and eyeshot.

And that encounter never would have happened, that joy never would have happened, that richness never would have happened, if Larry had not refused to see that man only as the relatively low-level functionary that was his employment but instead as Luigi, a beautiful image of God

That encounter never would have happened if Larry had seen Luigi as “just another doorman.”

That encounter never would have happened if Larry hadn’t on some level seen Christ in Luigi day after day for years ... an act that enabled Luigi to see the Christ in Lorenzo as well.

Mary!

Rabbouni!

Lorenzo!

Luigi!

Melba!

Ernest!

Elizabeth!

Beyonce!

Tanner!

Tiera!

Reyna!

Brittney!

The joy of greeting each other when we realize that we are all capable of amazing things.

The joy of embracing when we realize that we are all creations of great power and great beauty.

Jesús the rabbi went to the cross because he refused to treat anyone as “just” anything and because he saw broken wings as only needing to be mended with a loving touch and sunken eyes only to be healed with a look of loving recognition.

Jesús the rabbi went to the cross and was executed by the state only to re-emerge as one of the ones he most loved ... a day laborer as seemingly out of place in the palace of those who killed him as Beyonce felt at the Country Music Awards on a night that became the impetus for her to claim that there is no art or music or any part of life that comes with a “whites only” sign.

We are all capable of amazing things.

We are all creations of great power and great beauty.

Teenagers can stand up against lynch mobs.

Black women can sing country music.

Gardeners can be the very image of the divine.

And we can all be a part of setting each other free and all it takes is cultivating the sense to see Christ in every one and remembering that nobody, none of us is “just another” anything.

The Little Rock Nine didn’t just happen. Someone had to choose those nine students. To see something in them that nobody else did ... and to come up around them to help them endure the unimaginable abuse they were bound to suffer.

That person was Daisy Bates, the head of the Arkansas chapter of the NAACP. Daisy regularly drove the nine students to school and helped protect them from the crowds and even joined Little Rock Central’s parent organization.

Years later, Daisy would say, “The true measure of a person’s character is how they treat those who can do nothing for them.”

I think Daisy would have recognized Jesús in that garden.

And if she can, we can, too.

And it's about time.

In fact there is no time to lose.

Because, you see, the resurrection is now.

It's happening all around us!

Jesús is the gardener waiting for us to recognize him.

The resurrection is now.

Now is the time.

The time to break free and the time to break one another free.

Now is the time.

All your life.

You were only waiting for this moment to arise.

Blackbird fly.

Alleuia. Amen.