



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Late last year, we received the good news that we received a grant to build an ecosystem of storytelling in Detroit. Of course, Detroit always had an incredible ecosystem of storytelling, but our job is to somehow help elevate these important stories about Detroit. And it came from the Lilly Foundation and we have some wonderful partners with us, Detroit PBS, Detroit Opera, some startups, some artists, and a seminary. And this grant was built on the relationships that this church has built in metro Detroit over the past several decades. And I am so grateful that we were able to get that grant. There were 1,100 applications for the grant, and there were 50 sites chosen, and ours was one.

And I want to tell you a little bit today about that storytelling practice that we're going to be trying to elevate. The title of the grant is called Faith in Detroit, and that means that we want to see the people who have a compelling and true and powerful faith in the city of Detroit and its surrounding suburbs. But we also want people who have faith in Detroit as the city, the place where these changes occur. And that's because there are many different ways in which people will talk about Detroit. There's a lot of boosterism in the city, and it often follows a certain narrative arc. There was a rise and then there was a ruin, and then there was the aftermath.

But we wanted to pick up on those stories where there was resilience and resurrection, and people who made a determined decision to find God where they were. Those people are incredibly important. And the way you disrupt a grand narrative of rise and ruin by resilience and resurrection is not by trying to elevate one story, but by elevating many stories and releasing them.

And one story that captured us during our preparation for the grant was told by Janine Spencer Gilbert, who is at the Church of the Messiah. I came across that story when I was watching a news article in March of 2025. And it was tracing the relationship between 150 Venezuelan asylum seekers who were bused from Houston to Chicago, and then from Chicago to Detroit, where they were placed in a defunct nursing home on West Grand Boulevard.

And those 150 Venezuelans arrived without any winter clothing. They arrived, many of them wearing flip flops. They arrived without any toiletries or clothes, but they were placed in this defunct nursing home. And the neighbors told them that they could get help if they went to the Church of the Messiah, which was right down the street, an Episcopal church that was right down the street in Detroit. It's not a resource-rich church, but it's a church that is known for caring for the community. And so that Sunday they went to the Church of the Messiah, all 150 of them, and they showed up for service because they heard there was lunch afterwards.

And the Church of the Messiah, people gathered together and fed them. And a woman, Janine Spencer Gilbert, took over their care. They worked the extended network. Our church supplied them with both funding and with toiletries, as well as many others. And Janine took the initiative, organized their group. She found out who was it that spoke the best English and put them in charge as her co-chair of the committee, and they worked like crazy and they cared for them. Of those 150, most of them have made another shift to west Detroit, and they have found housing and jobs and are living productive lives, and some of them have stayed on as members of the Church of the Messiah.

Now, when I saw this news article, I became interested. I deeply admire the pastor of the Church of the Messiah. But I was not curious about him, I was curious about the lay person who was doing that work. Because as I've gotten older and longer in my ministry, it's the lay people who are stepping forward that truly interest me. The stories they tell, the why of what they're doing is incredibly important. So I reached out to Janine. And I asked her why? Why did you suddenly see this as something you could do? Why do you do this with your life? Why do you lead all of the community outreach for Messiah? And she told me a bit of her story.

Janine was raised in a home that was beset by abuse. Her father disappeared at an early age, and when she reunited with him as a teenager, when she found out he was at a club and she went to see him, he gave her a single dollar bill and then disappeared again. Her mother struggled with mental health and had troubles with her anger, and oftentimes Janine would have to sleep under her bed because her mother in the middle of the night would come in and beat the bed. And she spent time in and out of foster care.

But her mother did her one great blessing. She brought her to a church in Detroit called Our Lady of Sorrows. It's a Catholic church, which is now closed down. And it was there that she was loved on. It was there that she found sanctuary. It was there that she found safety. It was there that she found support. And so Janine, as she made her way through her own challenges, remembered that love that she received and she was called by God to carry on that love to others.

When Janine and I were speaking about it, I asked her to send me an email that said in more detail exactly how it happened, because it was obvious to me that Janine's exchanges with God wasn't just a kind of gratitude that you feel after something good happens and you connect the dots on your own. It's that her relationship with God was dynamic and intimate and often argumentative. And this is what she wrote to me:

“I heard God speaking to me and telling me, ‘This is the work I want you to do.’ I argued with God and told him, ‘No, this is not what I want to do. I just want to be left alone. I just want to be by myself. I'm hurt. I'm angry.’ God and I would have these back and forth battles all the time. God would wake me up from my sleep, show me dreams, and tell me, ‘Get up and let's get going. You can't be depressed now. You have to move on. This is what I want you to do. This is what you should be doing.’ And I'd say, ‘God, leave me alone. I'm trying to rest here.’ God then reminded me that there's no rest for the weary. ‘You are blessed Janine. You are loved, so let's get up and love on some people.’

“And that's what I do because I was told to do this work. So joining the Church of the Messiah and doing the work was already in me. I have been president of the Field Street Block Club for more than 20 years. I was a community engagement specialist for Genesis Hope for over 11 years. I ran a business, a hair salon for over 20 years. I've raised two beautiful daughters, despite everything I went through. I was a single mom at 16. I took care of my parents and I was their main caregiver before they passed. I am newly married and I'm on fire for God. I love God. I love what God is doing in my life because He built me and molded me into the woman I am today. So on the day the Venezuelans came to the Church of the Messiah, I knew from my years of training and organizing that they needed immediate help. God showed me and told me what to do for them.”

Yesterday I called Janine to wish her a Happy Easter, and she told me that she had published a chapter in a forthcoming book on women religious leaders in Detroit. And the end of the chapter that she shared with me was an address to all those who have struggled, and particularly to women and girls. This is what she said. It's a message to every woman, every girl, every survivor.

“If you have been broken, I need you to hear me with your spirit, not your ears. I need you to read this with your soul, not your eyes. You are not broken beyond repair. You are not disqualified. You are not forgotten. You are not alone. Every crack in you is an opening for God to pour something in. Every fracture is a piece where His light can shine through. You are not broken. You are being rebuilt. What people said to break you was a lie. What they did to hurt you will not win. What you lost will be restored in ways you can't even imagine. Believe what God whispers, not what trauma shouts.

“I want you to look at your life the way I had to learn to look at mine, not as a collection of painful pieces, but as a masterpiece with intentional cuts and curves. Just like a puzzle, nothing fits until everything fits. And once it comes together, you finally will see what God was crafting all along. You are gracefully broken, gracefully healed, gracefully rebuilt, gracefully loved, gracefully chosen, and you will rise because I did. And if God did that for me, He will surely do it for you.”

Now, I have shared this story with you because I want to lift up in many ways how the Gospel of Matthew today, bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus, is a story, and a story that is threefold. It is, of course, the story of Easter, but it's also the story of Jesus. And the story of Jesus is someone who, from God, who was both God and completely human, someone who came as God's Son, who went through trauma and tragedy and transformation and triumph so that you and I could find our way through those same things. So that you and I could follow that story arc through trauma and tragedy and transformation and triumph, and find our way through the resurrection.

The resurrection is not merely a reward for living a good life. The resurrection is not merely a belief that should capture your imagination. The resurrection is not merely something that we can argue about philosophically or theologically. The resurrection becomes real when we see that arc in someone's life. When we see them move through trauma and tragedy and transformation and triumph. The story of Easter is about the story of Jesus and the power of Jesus to bring life out of death.

And the story of Easter is also about the story of us. And the women in today's gospel are a perfect example of the story of us. They go to see the tomb is what we read in Matthew. In Mark, we read that they go with spices to anoint the body to follow the basic practices of how you cared for the dead, which were interrupted after Jesus's crucifixion. The women are just doing the next right thing in their lives. And they walk past soldiers who have been struck and turned into stone, and they walk into an event in which the stone is rolled away, and in which they receive an angelic proclamation, and in which they see on their way to deliver the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus Himself.

Matthew's resurrection has been given to us in high definition. You see all the sights and sounds, all the powerful demonstrations of God's power on earth through Christ. But keep in mind there is the same arc for them as it is for Jesus. They move through trauma, to tragedy, to transformation, and to triumph. Their arc, their story is now folded within Jesus's story. Do you see what I'm getting at today?

And you see finally in this beautiful gospel, the story itself is told two or three times to get across the idea that the work that we do when we tell our story is to

bear witness to that story. That witness is repeated again and again, and it says to the disciples, go to Galilee. I'll meet you there. There's only one problem with those instructions. Jesus tells them to go to Galilee in the Gospel of Matthew, and in the Gospel of Mark. In the Gospel of John and in the Gospel of Luke, He tells them to go to Jerusalem.

So which way did they go? It's not unlike those moments when I'm driving with my loved one. We're trying to figure out which way to go. Why did the gospel writers keep the story as it was? I'll tell you, the reason why they stayed with Galilee is they wanted to convey to you that when Jesus rises from the dead, eternity begins, which means that we will see Jesus everywhere. So the story of the women is the story that is our story. When we see Jesus as the resurrected Lord, we are changed. The resurrection is not a mere belief. It's a way of life that begins today when you can say with me, hallelujah! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed.

So my question to you today, as you think about all the stories that you might have about your faith, and we want to hear your stories, where is your story of resurrection? Where is that story of trauma and tragedy and transformation and triumph? Look for that story in your life and you will find, I promise you, the echo and shadow of our risen Lord, for He is risen. He is risen indeed, and we have come to bear witness and to tell that story.

Amen.