



301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Notre Dame

By Kerrie O'Brien (See Kerrie O'Brien's [website](#) for more information on her first collection, *Illuminate*)

Certain mornings

I would be the only one

To see the first streams of it –

Light

Tumbling through stained glass

Smattering everything

Red gold rose blue.

The beauty almost frightening.

Yves Klein would daub his women

Blue

And hurl them at the canvas.

Living brushes

Haphazard and outrageous –

Same effect.

Different every day

This glittering cave

Big beautiful lit up thing.

It knew and knew

Why I had come.

Blue gold rose red

Falling like water

My river walk,

My morning prayer.

I would step into it slow

Circling the altar

Gold cross flickering



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In the centre
Anchored, rooted, still.
As above, so below
Eyes closed
Filling my heart
With the warmth of it
Until my body was
Sunlight and roses
And the fear
Fell away in petals
Would you believe it
If I told you
Nothing felt separate.

Few religious landmarks carry more global recognition than Our Lady of Paris, the great Cathedral of Notre Dame. Begun in the 12th century by Pope Alexander III, Our Lady was built on the foundation of a Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter, Sky God and moral protector of the Italian people. On the evening of April 15th, the world watched in horror as a massive fire consumed the historic building, ravaging the cathedral's roof, spire, and portions of the rib vaulting. Deep into the night, strangers gathered to pray together on the river banks, helplessly looking on as 450 firefighters tended to the blaze for over nine hours. In the morning light through a thick haze of smoke and rubble, the world breathed a sigh of relief—Our Lady was severely damaged, but still standing. Her shimmering crosses, stately arches, and soaring buttresses were still intact. Astoundingly, safety officials now say that had the fire gone on even 15 more minutes, the entirety of the structure would have collapsed.

As the embers died down, a suspenseful search for Our Lady's vast collection of priceless relics and artifacts continued. And then the cries of joy came pouring in as the precious treasures were discovered. The crown of thorns believed to have been worn by Jesus at the time of his crucifixion! The trio of rose windows! The great organ! The copper rooster from the church spire! One of the most prized missing possessions recovered just happened not to be an artifact at all, but three



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beehives stationed on the roof of the sacristy, home since 2013 to 180,000 bees. Nicolas Geant began tending the beehives as an effort to counteract massive colony die-off from a lethal combination of pesticides, global warming and a threat to their habitats.

Days went by, then finally: "An ounce of hope," wrote Geant on social media. "Drone photos show that the 3 beehives are still in place and seem to be intact!" Then on Friday, thousands of bees were discovered huddling together on the neck of a gargoyle and then returning back to their hives. Remarkably, the carbon dioxide smoke from the fire had not killed them but simply gotten them drunk—and put them to sleep. When in peril, the drunken bees didn't abandon their hives, but stuck together and protected their queen, sheltering nearby before they could return.

"A miracle!" exclaimed the beekeeper. Awakening on their high perch, the bees were free to return to their hives and to get back to the very important business of pollinating the Parisian spring. Had we lost those bees in the fire, we would have not simply had their tiny lives to lament, but the cherry blossoms, the lilies of the valley and the wood violets, the tulips and the lilacs. I wonder if those bees have any idea how much the world needed for them to be alive, and not dead after all? The Easter symbolism cannot be lost on us. Here is a resurrection in our midst. Beating all of the odds, the Easter paradox is this: that in the midst of tragedy life persists. Joy persists. For many of us, this business of Easter is a rather countercultural enterprise. Living through this moment in our nation's history can seem like we're trapped in a Good Friday world—full of political corruption, senseless violence, and fear, lamenting the state of our Mother Earth. Others of us are living through own personal Good Fridays, struggling with devastating transitions, losses, and hardships. Some days, we are just not sure we can make it through another day.

Richard Smallwood is the composer of our offertory anthem, *Total Praise*. He tells this story about writing the song:

In October 1995, my mother was ill, my godbrother was terminally ill, and I was a caregiver, going from the hospital to my house, taking care of everything. Caregiving is a very difficult thing to do. It's time-consuming, and if you don't watch out, you'll end up in the hospital, too. I also began to feel that I wasn't doing enough for my loved ones. I felt helpless and inadequate in what I was doing. I



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just sat down at the piano in my living room and started playing, and "Total Praise" just started coming out.

What I call "mountaintop praise" when everything is going well and you have so much to praise [God for] is easy. But the opposite of that is what I call "valley praise," when you are in a dark situation and you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. But yet we praise [God] anyhow, because we understand that this too shall pass and even though it's a dark situation, God is with us through it.

I think this distinction is helpful between "mountaintop" and "valley" praise. Easter calls on us to find the praise in the valleys of our lives. Easter reminds us that yes—the reality is that in our world, we are surrounded by death and destruction. Yes— so much is lost and cannot be recovered—yes—but.... in the midst of it all—look at how life has triumphed in spite of it all—and celebrate that!

Sometimes poets can do Easter the most justice. The poet Lucille Clifton writes:

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into a kind of life? i had no model.
born in Babylon both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight my other hand;
come celebrate with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me and has failed.

Something has tried to kill each one of us. Something deeply tragic has happened to us that we didn't think we could recover from—a debilitating addiction, illness or accident, a paralyzing loss, a devastating betrayal— and yet each of us in our own way have known the miracle of joy where we never imagined it could survive. Like the earth awakening in spring, our spirits have an unbelievable capacity for renewal. We are creatures who understand resurrection intuitively because we have all



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lived it. And today on Easter, we muster every bone in our body in gratitude for what we have survived— to celebrate, to give life and God our praise.

I close with the words of Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski:

Try to praise the mutilated world,

Remember June's long days, and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine

You should praise the mutilated world.

Remember the moments when we were together in a white room and the curtain fluttered.

Return in thought to the concert where music flared.

Praise the mutilated world and the gray feather a thrush lost,

and the gentle light that strays and vanishes and returns.

Happy Easter and Amen.