

“Earthly Resurrection”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may vary from the written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found at ucmvt.org/category/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Readings

1. [“Beginners”](#) by Denise Levertov

2. selection from *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* by Rubem A. Alves

“What is hope? It is the presentiment that imagination is more real and reality is less real than it looks. It is the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word. It is the suspicion that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe. That the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual; and in a miraculous and unexplained way life is opening up creative events which will open the way to freedom and resurrection...”

Sermon

Many of you know that I traveled to Honduras back in March as part of an interfaith pilgrimage to learn about the root causes of migration. Because the delegation was so large, we broke into three smaller groups for some of those days. The group of about 25 people that I was with traveled a few hours southwest from San Pedro Sula into the Santa Barbara region.

We traveled over mile after mile of undulating hills and past acres and acres of sugar cane to the community of La Presa along the banks of the Tapalapa River. The community like so many communities in the country was resisting a foreign hydroelectric dam project that would flood their community if built and cause damage to forests and mountains above the village. Community leaders led our small group down to the river on one afternoon. We sat upon the rocks and waded into the cool waters. Everyone took joy in being there. And, I couldn't help but be reminded of the rivers here in Vermont whose banks I have sat upon and in whose waters I have swum.

How lucky are we that we get to live upon this Earth and be graced by its beauty? Especially on a day like today we can feel the glory of the natural world around us.

This beauty and love of the natural world in large part inspired the work of Berta Cáceres, an indigenous human rights and environmental defender.

In April of 2015, Berta Cáceres traveled from Río Blanco, Honduras to San Francisco to receive the Goldman Environmental Prize, an award granted by the Goldman Foundation to honor the achievements of grassroots environmental activists from around the world.¹ Berta was granted the prize for her work with the Lenca people, an indigenous community spanning both El Salvador and the southwestern region of Honduras. Together, they successfully resisted the efforts of a foreign hydroelectric dam company and the Honduran government to illegally take their land to build a dam that would have flooded farmland and permanently changed the river as a natural habitat and a site of religious ceremony.

Hundreds of indigenous Lenca people took the streets in Honduras' capital and then ultimately set up a road block prompting a standoff with Honduran military forces. After the military coup in 2009, human rights and land defenders like Berta Cáceres and the people in her community faced more intense scrutiny and threat from the political and economic systems oppressing her people and so many others throughout the country. The community did suffer one tragic loss during this specific fight. One of their comrades, Tomas Garcia, was shot during a peaceful protest, raising the stakes of the community's defense of their land. However, they kept on. Eventually, in 2012, the company withdrew from the project citing ongoing community resistance.

That April evening in 2015, Berta took the stage in San Francisco and delivered her brief acceptance speech to an audience of thousands.²

She began: "In our worldview, we are beings who come from the earth, the water, and the corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardian of the rivers, in turn protected by the spirits of young girls, who teach us that giving our lives in various ways for the protection of the rivers is giving our lives for the well-being of humanity and of this planet...

Despertémos, despertémos, humanidad. Ya no hay tiempo."
Wake up, wake up, humanity. There is no longer any time left!

¹ <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/berta-caceres/>

² Berta Cáceres acceptance speech, 2015 Goldman Prize ceremony, <https://youtu.be/AR1kwx8b0ms>

“We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism, and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction...We must answer [the call of the rivers]. Our Mother Earth, militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated, demands that we take action. Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a just and dignified way, in a way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and of its spirits.”

Berta would return to Río Blanco and continue on in the struggle with her people. Although they were successful in resisting this particular hydroelectric dam project, the Honduran government had declared the country “open for business” and was granting concessions or land giveaways to transnational corporations for extractive industries like mining and hydroelectric projects that would push out local communities - many of them indigenous - and threaten local ecosystems.

Berta, of course, realized her own life was at risk from the work she was doing. In March of 2016, paramilitary security forces broke into her home and shot her to death. By this time, Berta had become a national and international figure inspiring thousands to keep on fighting for indigenous rights, self-determination, and the defense of the environment.

The confluence of Easter and Earth Day this year in some ways may seem to pose a liturgical conundrum. But, to me, it seems perfectly fitting.

Earth Day asks us to face the realities and impact of our collective refusal to treat ecological devastation and the climate crisis with the urgency it demands - the needless death and wrenching loss - and to choose another path, a path of life flourishing and joy. The Easter story invites us to ponder the question of how we can emerge from death into life.

In the case of those early Christian communities, they had followed and dearly loved their friend and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, a man who healed others and proclaimed a vision for a new world order where the tables would be turned and monuments and temples of power would come crashing down - a new world of heaven on earth.

They witnessed as he was brutally murdered and laid to rest and then miraculously was resurrected to new life. The Easter story again and again proclaims that the tomb is not the final chapter - that new life is possible.

This theme of resurrection came up on my trip to Honduras. Our delegation was asked on a few occasions to accompany local communities in acts of political protest. Our presence there as mostly light-skinned, U.S. citizens offered protection to local people who were under surveillance and whose lives had been threatened for engaging in nonviolent protest and resistance.

One of the common protest chants that I heard over and over again went like this: "Berta no se murió, Berta no se murió. Berta se hizo millones, se hizo millones, Berta soy yo." Berta didn't die, she didn't die. Berta became millions, became millions. I am Berta.

A similar sentiment was expressed in regards to Bishop, now Saint, Oscar Romero. Monseñor Romero as he is called in much of Latin America, was a Catholic priest from El Salvador who became an outspoken advocate for the poor and critic of the military-led government of El Salvador in the 1960s and 1970s. He was assassinated in March of 1980 while saying mass, and our trip was timed to coincide with this anniversary.

The people while marching often chant: "Romero vive, vive, la lucha sigue, sigue." Romero lives, the struggle continues.

We heard this chant as we marched through the city of El Progreso on a "Stations of the Cross" journey reinterpreted as the "Stations of the Crisis" before heading to a mass at a local Catholic church which was being celebrated in honor of Monseñor Romero.

Oscar Romero famously said two weeks before his death: "I have been frequently threatened with death. I have to say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection: If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the people of El Salvador."

Oscar Romero has remained a significant figure not just for the people of El Salvador but for people throughout Latin America and all throughout the world who struggle towards justice for the poor.

The message of these martyrs - Oscar Romero, Berta Cáceres, and others - continues to live on in the people who continue in the struggle against poverty, against militarization, against ecological destruction.

All of these struggles are interconnected and in continuing in the struggle, the people find new life. For movements of liberation, this is the Good News of Easter.

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff wrote of the interconnection of poverty and ecological destruction in his book "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor," and he wrote, "To hear these two interconnected cries and to see the same root cause that produces them is to carry out integral liberation."³

Integral liberation - a liberation that at its root frees us all, that seeks wholeness for all of humanity and all of creation.

In this call for liberation, I hear Berta's plea: "Despertémos, despertémos, humanidad. Ya no ya tiempo."

There are many others who are now sounding the alarm and calling us into action. We know that the devastating impacts of climate destabilization are already upon us, and without urgent, transformative action will get far worse. We know that some on our globe are more vulnerable to these impacts than others even while being less responsible for the fossil fuel use that has led to the greenhouse gas pollution now wreaking havoc upon the planet's natural systems.

This includes people we encountered on our delegation to Honduras who spoke of lengthening dry seasons and drought taking away their ability to live off the land and pushing them out of the countryside - a pattern seen all around the world. We are all so intimately connected.

People are not just sounding the alarm but taking bold and creative action - like the recent Climate March from Middlebury to Montpelier. These are actions of love.

One of the messages I heard loud and clear on my pilgrimage to Honduras is that people don't want to leave despite what we hear in our U.S. media and from political leaders. They love their country. The rivers, the forests. The people. Its beauty.

It is this love that animates the ongoing protest and resistance - la lucha que sigue, sigue. The struggle that goes on and goes on.

Jesus throughout his life preached the coming of heaven here on earth. A paradise of abundant life that could be found right here upon the earth not only in the afterlife.

³ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

For so many in Honduras, the natural world that is home to them is already paradise. This is something we can relate to as Vermonters - many of us believe this land is like paradise. But for Hondurans, it is a paradise that has been forsaken for the accumulation of wealth and power of the few.

We have the possibility of a different path, of relating to one another and the Earth from a place of mutuality and dignity, of choosing life-giving sources of energy, like the wind and sun, rather than continuing to consume fossil fuels which will only continue needless suffering.

So we ask - what is the resurrection that we need in this moment? If we, as a human community interconnected and interdependent with the earth and all other creatures, are going to be resurrected now, what needs to die and what needs to be reborn? We can ask this on a personal level and collectively.

- our belief that we are separate from one another
- our need to have already solved the problem before we begin taking action to make change
- dismissing inconvenient facts and sobering truths about the need to move rapidly pass fossil fuels

We must break out of the tombs of capitalism and colonialism and patriarchy and take on our shared project: the flourishing of life - human life and all the species of the planet. This interdependent web of existence.

Now is the time of budding and beginning. Each day holds within it the promise and potential of choosing resurrection - choosing life beyond death. Choosing to name ourselves amongst the millions who carry on the message of martyrs, a message of love beyond fear and despair.

Now is the time of leaving the empty tomb with fear and astonishment and with resolve to share the good news.

“But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life...

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.”

May we know ourselves part of this unfolding to love the earth and to be part of sustaining
the fullness of life.

Amen.