

“A New Day to Be Free”
Homily by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
April 17, 2022

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Readings

“Desert Spring,” Victoria Safford¹

“The humanist speaks of Easter,” Kendyl Gibbons

Sermon

What in you yearns to be free?

What in you is in need of new life?

In this spring season, we come again to this time of holy days. And on this particular weekend, the calendars align with the ending of the Christian Holy Week and the beginning of the Jewish Passover.

The story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and their freedom from slavery and the Easter story of the death and resurrection of Jesus both speak to the literal and figurative journeys we take as humans through passages of despair to moments of liberation and rebirth, beginnings and new life.

Both stories mark life-changing moments for their communities.

I like to imagine Moses, Miriam, all of the Israelite people as they crossed the Red Sea and turned around to look back at the land they had escaped where they had been enslaved. I imagine them looking back at that place where so many tears were shed, where their bodies were pushed to their limits doing back-breaking work, where they cried out again and again for mercy and for liberation. They look back perhaps almost in disbelief as the waters close in

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/desert-spring>

on the Egyptian Pharaoh's army. And, they realize they are free. A whole new life awaits them. Yes, they will end up wandering in the wilderness for forty years until they make it to the promised land, but at that moment standing at the edge of the sea, something new has begun.

More than a millennium later, as the story goes, Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher, celebrated the Passover seder with his followers. He told them of his impending death but also that he would have new life. He was sentenced to death for being a threat to the Roman empire and was brutally put to death on a cross. Those closest to him mourned his death and went to his tomb to care for his body - Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary, the mother of James, among them. They find his body gone and are told that he has been raised from the dead. In some accounts, the women who had gone to the tomb go to tell the other disciples. Some versions say that Jesus even appeared to groups of them within days of his death and apparent resurrection.

Whatever may have happened, this was a turning point for this community of believers. The teachings of their beloved friend now had new meaning, and they were starting upon an uncharted path - a path of carrying forward the message of their friend and teacher - that love is boundless and does not conform to the wishes of the powerful.

From the ancient people of Israel fleeing bondage in Egypt to the followers of Jesus resisting Roman empire and into the years and peoples that have followed, the thirst for freedom and new life has been strong.

The longing for freedom runs deep. It is called to heart and mind as these ancient stories are remembered, as the memories of desert crossings, death and resurrection come forward along with the earth's own remembrance of spring's return.

We seek freedom. Freedom from addiction. Freedom from hatred. Freedom from over-consumption. Freedom to love who we love without scorn or derision. Freedom to express the fullness of our gender and sexuality without fear of violence. Freedom to live in peace.

Freedom to live, not according to the value assigned to you by the job market or the housing market or the appreciation or depreciation of your investments or by a history book or the exclusionary theology of your childhood, but the freedom to live according to the sacredness and inherent worth you know is yours by virtue of being alive, and by virtue of being a manifestation of divinity itself.

We seek freedom and the new life that emerges when that freedom comes at last.

What relief we can feel when freedom comes, and yet, as both stories point out, we can also feel tentative in the face of that new possibility - freedom is what we want, new life is what we want, but we aren't always ready for it.

The seas have parted. The stone has been rolled away. Yet, it can take time and working through a whole lot of fear to feel ready for what comes next.

I imagine the early disciples of Jesus felt a lot of fear. They had just witnessed their teacher executed. They knew how risky it was to speak out against the powerful, and to be called to continue preaching Love even in the face of death.

Moving through fear takes us on a journey from freedom to liberation.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke to this journey. He said, "Liberation is costly. Even after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert. They had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom... We must remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity. We must hold hands and refuse to be divided."²

We cannot get from freedom to liberation alone. We need others alongside us who share the longing for freedom, who join with us in bearing the responsibilities and difficulties of that freedom - the complaining, the weariness, the obstacles, the refusal, even, to move forward. Yet, in our joining together, we can move with possibility in the direction of liberation and new life.

We move towards claiming the freedom of spirit and the divine love that is ours and that cannot be taken away. Enslavement could not take this away. Crucifixion could not take this away.

And today, we continue to break free and to bring others along with us.

It is a new day and a new season to renew our search for freedom and our commitment to liberation from oppression - the oppression that lives within ourselves and the oppression that

² Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*.

is built into the systems that keep some scraping by at the margins and others fearful to publicly proclaim the trueness of who they are.

In this season of spring, as the earth and the holy stories guide us to liberation and rebirth, let us open ourselves to the light.

The return of the light ushers in the possibility of the morning, the breaking of day and of new life. As we have done in the past, we have made it through the deep darkness of winter and, along with the crocuses and tree buds, we are once again re-emerging.

We are re-emerging and rising with hope for new life.

Kendyl Gibbons writes, “Life happens, keeps happening,
The dead don’t rise – but we do.
One day, it happens; you take a breath, and it doesn’t hurt to breathe.
You start to see people again, really see them.
Hope rises. Community rises. You rise. We rise. Life rises.
Not because death isn’t real; crucifixion is not just pretend.
But something else is just as real, maybe even more real.
Something happens next –
That is the other thing we know for sure.
Life rises. Outrage rises. Love rises. Faith rises. Tears rise. Hope rises.
This, I do believe.”

Indeed, let us believe.
We, too, will rise.
On this new day.
And that will be our alleluia.