

“Rise Again”
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
March 31, 2024

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Readings

Gospel of Mark 16:1-8 (The Message translation)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?”

Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

He said, “Don’t be afraid. I know you’re looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He’s been raised up; he’s here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there, exactly as he said.”

They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

Excerpt from “Winnie” by Gwendolyn Brooks

My Poem is life, and not finished.
It shall never be finished.
My Poem is life, and can grow.

Wherever life can grow, it will.
It will sprout out,
and do the best it can.

I give you what I have.
You don't get all your questions answered in this world.
How many answers shall be found
in the developing world of my Poem?
I don't know. Nevertheless I put my Poem,
which is my life, into your hands, where it will do the best it can.

Sermon

The heaviest thing I have ever tried to move is my car. On more than one occasion, my car has gotten stuck in the ruts made in our dirt driveway by two tons of weight sinking into the softened dirt during mud season. Thankfully, there's my spouse as well as neighbors who are available to help push the vehicle out of its stuck position.

I can imagine the worry the women in the gospel reading felt as they anticipated going to their friend, Jesus's, tomb the morning after the sabbath and finding a heavy stone for them to roll away in order to enter. As the story goes, the women bring along spices and oils to spread over his body to prepare it for burial. When they arrive, they find that the stone has already been rolled back, and Jesus's body isn't there. Instead, they find a young man dressed in white who tells them not to be alarmed. Jesus isn't there but has been raised. The young man instructs them to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they can find him there. And the story ends with the women stunned saying nothing to anyone.

This story, told in the Gospel of Mark, is the culminating story of Holy Week in the Christian liturgical calendar. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and was greeted with adulation by a crowd waving the leaves of palm trees. Authorities were already on alert that he would be arriving and the threat that he posed to the ruling order put him on their watch list. In these final days, Jesus visits the temple and he is so angered to see the moneychangers spoiling this sacred place that he flips the tables they had been using. Then, after sharing the Passover seder with his group of disciples, Jesus was arrested. He was briefly tried then sentenced to death by crucifixion. And, as we heard in the gospel reading, the Easter story shares the message that Jesus was then risen from the dead.

The story doesn't end with the women fleeing the tomb and remaining silent. Word gets out that Jesus was not found in the tomb and then according to biblical scripture he appears to his

followers and remains with them for a period of time. And, that group of disciples continues to meet and preach and spread the message of love and radical inclusion.

The spiritual arc of Holy Week compellingly brings us along the journey from death to life and despair to hope. The Easter story as a whole asks us to grapple with questions of life amid death.

Those early followers of Jesus grappled with death of the literal kind, the brutal death of a dear friend and teacher.

In our own lives, we face deaths of many kinds.

Death in the form of loved ones lost.

Death as old roles and identities are given up, lost, or taken from us.

Death as certain dreams we have end up not being possible to realize.

And, death upon death as cities are ravaged by bombs and people die of starvation.

In the face of death, we can have no idea what will come next. We can wonder, what new course will my life take? We can have a sense that something else is possible, but it can be hard to feel that in the moment of our despair.

In the Easter story, we see that the mourning and lamentation of profound loss can lead to rebirth and resurrection.

It comes after passage through emptiness and grief.

And first, one must recognize that the stone has indeed been rolled away.

Only then is transformation possible.

We see this in that transforming moment when Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome discover that the stone has been moved and the tomb is no longer shut. Here is the first sign that transformation is coming. A sign that what once was — their teacher present with them as their central leader and an empire left unchallenged — will no longer be the same.

The Rev. Kendyl Gibbons writes: “The essence of Easter is transformation.

It is never about things going back to the way they were before.

The new life of spring is new; it’s not last year’s leaves -- those are over and done.

Even the empty tomb of the gospels is not a sign that Jesus and his entourage are going to resume their former life.

In fact, that way of things is finished.

It is only a radically new understanding of how to be a community together that can save them from dissolution and despair.”

Christians celebrate that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection brought forth a profound transformation. For many, this is a transformation of the relationship with the Divine and the redemption of human sin. The good news for some is that Jesus’s death atoned for the sins of all humanity and that he was united with God in heaven. There is also the good news that the message and teaching of Jesus could not be killed. His practice of radical inclusion was not left in the tomb.

Easter proclaims that profound transformation can occur in our lives.

Oftentimes with a jolt.

Sometimes with the first faint gasps and tears of loss.

The first few whispers among friends that something profound has occurred.

Something new is coming.

For Jesus and his disciples, the something new was the vision for a transformation on Earth in which the oppressive ways present in their time and place would not be sustained.

Even in our day we can see that there are old ways that are in the process of dying. There are ways of thinking and doing that are nothing but tombs for the human spirit, and these ways must be transformed.

We can see this now in the Middle East. As tens of thousands of people have been killed in Gaza, as Israelis struggle to bring forward a more democratic and pluralistic society amid their mourning, as Israelis and Palestinians stand together and insist on one another’s humanity, we are witnessing the questioning of old ways and a global demand for a new way of peace and life.

How can peace and life possibly emerge from the tomb of such destruction?

I don’t know. But, I do know that it won’t if we stop believing that peace and new life are possible.

Saleem Al-Naffar was a renowned Palestinian poet. He was born in a refugee camp in Gaza in 1963 and fled with his family to another refugee camp in Syria during the 1967 war. Al-Naffar found solace in poetry and later studied Arab literature at Tishreen University in Syria. After the 1994 founding of the Palestinian Authority, Al-Naffar returned with his family to live in Gaza. On December 7, 2023, Saleem Al-Naffar and his family were killed in an Israeli airstrike on their home in Gaza City.

This is his poem entitled, “Life.”

*Knives might eat
what remains of my ribs,
machines might smash
what remains of stones,
but life is coming,
for that is its way,
creating life even for us.*

Life is coming.
The emptiness of the tomb is not the end of the story.
Bombs and ravaged homes is not the end of the story.
The pit of grief is not the end of the story.
Something new can yet be made.
New life can yet rise.

Life is coming.
When people are free to roam the land, to plant and harvest olive trees and figs, to worship and dance in the desert regardless of race or religion,
life is coming.
When the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea fly and swim in clean air and clean water,
life is coming.
When people of all genders can be out and visible safely and joyfully,
life is coming.

As the poet Gwendolyn Brooks writes: “Wherever life can grow, it will. It will sprout out and do the best it can.”

And we must be the agents of life.

We must continue to ask:

What in our own lives and in our society needs to be transformed?

Where can we be rolling away the stone to reveal the possibility of something new emerging?

How can we participate in the rising up of new life?

What shapes this new world, ultimately, is love. For those early followers of Jesus, it was a love of their teacher and friend. And, it was a path of love that he showed to them through his actions and teachings. A path of love that rejected the hoarding of power and the oppression of those deemed less than.

It was a path of love forged on occupied land that turned upside down the notion that might makes right and that the rich should rule without consequence. Instead this path of love found strength and hope in embracing the enemy, in caring for the sick and outcast, in creating family and community among unlikely people and in unlikely ways.

A belief in this new world order meant that old ways would have to die to make way for new life.

The Christian theologian Walter Bruegemann asserts that “The Easter question...is whether you can permit in your horizon new healing power, new surging possibility, new ways of power in an armed, fearful world: new risk, new life, leaping, dancing, singing--and praising the powers beyond all our controlled powers.”

Right now, stones are being rolled away.

Transformations are beginning.

Can we permit healing, possibility, and new ways of power to enter our horizon?

Can we defy an armed and fearful world and embrace new risk and new life with leaping and dancing and singing?

The resurrection of new life is still arriving.

The green blades are still just beginning to rise above the hard soil.

New life is still being imagined and brought into being.

Can we allow ourselves to see the planted seed beginning to sprout?

The Earth shows us in its renewal that our path of transformation lies in wait.

The day will come when that seed will burst into life.

It may not be right now.

But, transformation is possible and Love is our companion in the waiting and in the making of a new world.

Life is coming.

Hope is coming.

Joy is coming.

So may it be.