

# “I Feel So Much Spring”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

1 April 2018

*Easter/Passover Sunday*

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Reading**                    **“Passover” – Lynn Ungar**

They thought they were safe  
that spring night; when they daubed  
the doorways with sacrificial blood.  
To be sure, the angel of death  
passed them over, but for what?  
Forty years in the desert  
without a home, without a bed,  
following new laws to an unknown land.  
Easier to have died in Egypt  
or stayed there a slave, pretending  
there was safety in the old familiar.

But the promise, from those first  
naked days outside the garden,  
is that there is no safety,  
only the terrible blessing  
of the journey. You were born  
through a doorway marked in blood.  
We are, all of us, passed over,  
brushed in the night by terrible wings.

Ask that fierce presence,  
whose imagination you hold.  
God did not promise that we shall live,  
but that we might, at last, glimpse the stars,  
brilliant in the desert sky.

## Reading

## “A Comma” - Magdalena I. García

After a life that was a whirlwind  
of undoing false teachings  
and reversing cruel practices;  
and after a week that was a vortex  
of imparting final lessons  
and enduring violent attacks;  
after all that incessant activity  
comes the silence of Holy Saturday,  
when the provocative teacher  
is apparently silenced,  
and the dangerous agitator  
is apparently restrained,  
but we know that death  
is just a comma,  
a pause, an interval,  
never the final point,  
because those who have planted  
seeds of justice and love  
rise each morning,  
resurrect each day  
in the words and actions  
of those who carry on the struggle,  
longing for freedom,  
raising their voices,  
risking their lives,  
until we reach the dawn  
when all punctuation is replaced  
with a loud exclamation,  
with a resounding “alleluia,”  
because the earth has been healed  
and all humanity has been satisfied.

## **Sermon: “I Feel So Much Spring”**

Well, I doubt, as a Unitarian, I’ll ever have a say in the matter, but, for the record, my vote is an emphatic “no.”

In recent years, the leaders of various branches of Christianity have been working toward establishing a single, set date for Easter.

Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (the head of the Greek Orthodox) have all been trying to find a common date on the calendar.

If they manage to pull it off, it will be an astounding feat.

There have been many attempts, going back centuries, to come to consensus about when Easter should be celebrated.

The confusing formula we use now, decided upon in 325, at the Council of Nicea, sets Easter on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox.

This means that Easter can take place anytime between March 22<sup>nd</sup> and April 25<sup>th</sup>.

But that’s just for the churches in the west that follow the Gregorian calendar.

For the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which follow the Julian calendar, Easter usually falls a week later.

This long-standing scheduling conflict goes back almost a thousand years to The Great Schism of 1054 that split Christianity into the eastern and western churches.

Now, besides making a long-overdue show of unity, coming to a shared date for Easter would, obviously, make it much easier for everyone to know when the holiday actually occurs.

An established date would simplify scheduling.

As the date shifts around so much, school and work schedules are disrupted in different months, from one year to the next.

Because Easter can fall anywhere within a range of five weeks, it means the timing of the long-holiday weekends we enjoy, aren't always easily predictable, at least not without the help of Google.

And because the date of Easter determines the date of Ash Wednesday, it means Mardi Gras, celebrated the day before Lent begins, varies over an equally wide range of days.

Ironically, the date of Easter matters to people partying the world over.

But, here's the thing, and here's why I'm opposed to a change: if it's decided that Easter will always take place on the second Sunday of April, which is apparently the proposed plan, I believe two significant things will be lost.

The first is that Easter will rarely coincide with Passover, as it now often does.

There is profound theological value, I believe, in holding these two religious holidays together. In seeing the freedom story of the Exodus—of the Israelites' deliverance from captivity in Egypt—alongside the Christian story of resurrection.

Given that most of the seeds of anti-Semitism  
were sown into the history of the world  
through the gospel accounts of Jesus' trial and crucifixion,  
there is a still ongoing need to bring reconciliation  
between these two faiths.

But, the bigger loss, for me, is theological.  
And it's personal.

Always having Easter in mid-April  
means missing out,  
at least in this part of the world,  
at least every few years,  
on the strange occasion to celebrate Passover and Easter  
in the earliest days of spring—  
when the air is still cold,  
when the skies are often grey,  
when snow still sometimes covers the ground.

Don't get me wrong.  
I love the onset of spring as much as anyone.

But celebrating these holidays  
with buds, or even leaves, on the trees  
and flowers at every turn,  
feels like both a missed and mistimed opportunity.

To me it just feels too easy.  
Because it asks so little of us.

In the swirl of chocolate bunnies and sugary Peeps  
and all the sun-shiny blessings of spring,  
we can miss the fact  
that these holidays and holy days  
call on us to bear witness once again  
to the journey from captivity to freedom,  
the journey from death to resurrection,  
the journey from all that has felt frozen, bleak, and barren,  
both within and around us,  
to the promise of life's ever-and-ongoing renewal.

When Easter serves as the very early gateway to spring,  
it reminds us that the resurgence of life  
so often requires a leap of faith.

It's easy to believe in the resurrection of the world around us  
when you're staring at a bunch of daffodils or tulips in full bloom.

It's quite another thing  
to see only the tightest bud  
or the faintest hint of colour  
in the emerging edge of a crocus  
and to trust—to believe somewhere in the depths of your being—  
that new and abundant life is possible.

Too often, celebrations of Passover and Easter  
skip right over the hard stuff,  
leaving out the uncertainty, and doubt, and second-guessing  
that are actually so much a part of these ancient stories.

\* \* \*

The tale is told of a church that would, each year,  
hold its Easter sunrise service at the rim of the Grand Canyon.

Every detail of the service was perfectly timed,  
so that the reading of the resurrection account  
coincided with the precise moment  
the sun broke forth over the horizon.

As the gospel story about the stone  
being rolled away from the tomb is read,  
a massive boulder is pushed over the edge of the cliff.

As the congregation watches it crash to the bottom of the canyon,  
and crumble to a thousand pieces,  
a massive orchestra and choir  
break into "The Hallelujah Chorus."

What, I ask you, is a holiday without a bit of drama?

But that drama doesn't really match

the actual drama of that first Easter.

As the story goes, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb  
early on the morning after the sabbath,  
but finds the grave standing wide open.

Startled, she runs to Jesus' disciples.

They take off to the tomb, and also finding it empty,  
return to their homes, baffled and afraid.

In her grief, Mary sits weeping at the tomb.  
When Jesus appears to her,  
she mistakes him for the gardener.

Eventually, when he calls her by name,  
she recognizes him and becomes the first person  
to understand something of what is happening.

Later, the gospels tell us,  
Jesus appears to all of his disciples.

They, too, eventually recognize him,  
though it is the story of Thomas  
and his deep doubts, his need of proof,  
that has had a way of resonating down the centuries  
with all who grapple with belief  
at the incredible claims of this story.

For those of his followers who came to believe,  
the story of the resurrection was slow to unfold.

It took time for the meaning of such strange events to sink in.

There was no "Hallelujah Chorus" at sunrise that Easter morning.

There was, instead, uncertainty and doubt  
that only gradually gave way to hope and to joy.

Easter wasn't a sudden, transforming moment.

It was the beginning of a powerful process  
that would, over time,  
recast Jesus' confused and frightened disciples  
into the women and men  
who would create and carry forward his church.

Regardless of whatever happened to Jesus' body,  
something life-altering occurred in the community he left behind,  
something that has dramatically changed  
the course of human history ever since.

\* \* \*

As with the Easter story,  
the story of the Exodus is weaved through and through  
with both doubt and despair.

Even as the Israelites were on their way to freedom,  
they couldn't keep from questioning  
whether they had had it better as slaves.

As they're being chased by the Pharaoh's army toward the Red Sea,  
fearing for their lives, they let Moses have it:

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt  
that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?

What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?

Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt,  
"Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"?

For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians  
than to die in the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

And this line of questioning didn't let up  
once they got to the other side of the sea.

Even as the advancing army, the story goes,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Exodus* 14: 11-12

was drowned in the water behind them.

On the other side of slavery,  
after surviving one plague after another,  
after being finally freed from centuries of captivity,  
the Israelites were quick to complain to Moses  
about their lack of food and water.

They blamed him for getting them into this mess.

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord  
in the land of Egypt,  
when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread;  
for you have brought us out into this wilderness  
to kill this whole assembly with hunger.<sup>2</sup>

Why did you bring us out of Egypt,  
to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?<sup>3</sup>

Moses, having quite enough of the complaints, cries out to God.

What shall I do with [these] people?  
They are almost ready to stone me.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, God comes through for Moses,  
telling him to take his staff and strike a rock at Horeb,  
from which will come water that the people may drink.

(As an aside: if you paid careful attention  
to the news this week, you may have heard  
that Benjamin Netanyahu,  
referencing this story from Exodus,  
was misheard and then misquoted  
by a major news outlet  
as having said water came from Iraq,  
when he actually said it came from a rock.  
If the writer and editors had been a bit more biblically literate,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Exodus* 16: 3

<sup>3</sup> *Book of Exodus* 17: 3

<sup>4</sup> *Book of Exodus* 17: 4

they would have likely recognized this story,  
central to the Jewish people.)

The lesson that stays with me, though, from the Passover story  
is that even when we yearn for freedom,  
the road to finding it (and keeping it)  
can be so much longer than we are willing to travel.

Too often, it can be tempting to simply stay put,  
choosing the creature comforts of our own captivity,  
rather than embrace the real risks  
that are often required if we are to change  
and live into our freedom.

\* \* \*

While I don't personally take either of the accounts  
from the Gospels or the *Book of Exodus* to be literally true,  
these ancient stories of faith  
do have a ring of authenticity  
that I know deep in my bones.

Maybe you know it, too.

These are, after all, such recognizably human stories.

And stories I need to hear,  
at precisely this time of year,  
when the splendour of spring is still a ways off,  
when my heart is weary with the state of the world,  
when "hope is hard to find."

I need to hear messages of freedom and hope, and human struggle, too,  
while we're still held in winter's weakening grip.

With its chill and still bleak sky,  
with its trees standing bare in their vigil of expectation,  
this in-between season confronts me with an awareness  
of all that has grown cold within me,  
the embers of dreams denied or too long-delayed,  
my burning coal of concern and commitment

spent down to indifference.

I need to hear these stories  
at the cusp of this new and needed season,  
that the restless stirrings of my soul  
might beckon me on toward better ways of being.

As excited as I will surely be to spot a crocus  
poking up through the warming mud any day now,  
I am moved all the more in knowing  
the seeds of those same flowers  
are stirring into new shapes,  
even now in the cold ground.

And their example—now invisible to the eye—  
causes me to wonder at the seeds taking root in my own heart—  
the ones that, if cultivated,  
might bloom beyond all that inhibits my living  
and bring me ever more into the fullness of my own being.

As Franz Kafka spoke of our need for  
“an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us,”  
I look with great hope to those seeds,  
pulsing with all the persistence of life itself,  
that will open me, anew and at last,  
despite my doubts, and beyond my bull-headedness,  
to more deeply engage with the life I am living.

If every tree were in bloom  
and the parks already full of flowers,  
we might easily miss the unfolding metaphor in which we live.

The one that imparts to us the knowledge  
that winter comes before spring,  
that bondage come before freedom,  
that despair comes before hope,  
and that death must come before resurrection.

It is tempting to want to leapfrog over life’s struggle  
by moving ahead to the relief that we hope will follow.

In our era of instant gratification,  
it's so easy to look for a short-cut through life's heartache.

Or worse, to pretend it doesn't exist,  
by succumbing to false hopes and off-the-rack resurrections  
that promise relief without any of the fuss.

But, in my experience, life doesn't work like that—  
or at least not for very long.

Instead, it comes closer to the hard truth found in the words  
of feminist theologian Beverly Harrison:  
“That which is authentic in the history of faith  
arises only out of the crucible of human struggle.”

And, that, I believe, is the enduring message of this day:  
that alongside the death-defying  
and sometimes death-denying rhetoric of these holidays,  
there is the very human story of struggle.

The struggle to understand.  
The struggle to believe.  
The struggle to keep faith.  
The struggle to embrace life.  
The struggle to claim the freedom that is ours.

But struggle is not the whole of the story.  
This day also reminds us that there is more.

There is freedom.  
There is resurrection.  
There is promise, and there is hope.

And there is so much spring within us,  
calling us on, to life.

Amen