

Singing Easter Songs

A sermon by Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron,
with the People of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage

Easter Sunday 2022

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43

Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

Sermon Anthem (Sung just before the sermon): *Redemption Song*, Bob Marley

Old pirates, yes, they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ships
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit
But my hand was made strong
By the hand of the Almighty
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly

Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?

'Cause all I ever have

Redemption songs – redemption songs

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery

None but ourselves can free our minds

Have no fear for atomic energy

'Cause none of them can stop the time

How long shall they kill our prophets

While we stand aside and look?

Ooh, some say it's just a part of it

We've got to fulfill the Book

Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?

'Cause all I ever have

Redemption songs – redemption songs

Am I the only one?

Does anyone else yearn to sing new songs, Easter songs?

Songs of Redemption

of Resilience

of Resistance

of Beloved Community in a Flourishing World

of the Liberating, Life-Giving Love known to us in Jesus....

(By "song" I mean, of course, literal songs...and I also mean narratives that tell us who we are and that make sense of the world for us...)

I'm tired of old songs....

tired of people being valued (or not) based on productivity, or gender, or race, or income, or *anything* other than the likeness of God, alive in them

tired of COVID

and more tired of **inequalities in access** to healthcare that persist

tired of war in Ukraine

and more tired of tyrants and despots who **ignore sovereignty** and the image of God in others

and of a world that rallies easily behind the War of the Moment, happy to be distracted from the **43 active wars**¹ going on right now

tired (still) of the stories of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Anjanette Young², Patrick Lyoya (Lee-OY-yə)

and more tired of the knowledge that TODAY, and HERE, the danger of dying from police shooting is significantly higher for black and brown bodies than for light-skinned bodies³

tired of one more mass shooting (this weekend, in a South Carolina mall)

As Rev. Michael reminded us last week, "the crucifixion happens anew each day."

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/17/us/chicago-police-raid-anjanette-young.html>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>

As much as the world changes,
oppression, degradation, and exploitation remain a part of the human condition.

AND...here's the Good News: the resurrection happens anew each day, too.

We are soooo ready for Easter Songs. We need Easter Songs.

Redemption Songs. Sons of Freedom.

And...wow! We have heard one this morning.

(Spoiler alert: there are more to come!)

Reflecting on Bob Marley's anthem *Redemption Song* has helped me think about Easter Songs.

This was the last song on Bob Marley's final album with The Wailers, before his death by brain cancer in 1981, at 36 years of age. In it, the story of the Exodus is retold through the experience of African survivors of slave ships and their descendants. The suffering and the injustice is well-known. But Marley refuses hopelessness, refuses to accept that even these realities are godforsakenness.

Marley recognizes that

- neither atomic energy, nor any energy "can stop the time." Powerful as these are, they are no match for the Eternal God of Love and Grace.
- that though prophets may be martyred, their work and message live on, and cannot be stopped
- that even in the bottomless pit, our hands are made strong for resistance by the hand of the Almighty.

In this song, we hear the most common message in the Bible, "Fear not."

Easter songs bear Good News:

Your existence is not defined by world powers, by destructiveness, or by evil.

Your purpose is not dictated by the Mighty,

but by the Almighty.

Let's get one thing straight: Powers and principalities are quite happy for Christians to proclaim a spiritual resurrection, or a resurrection that is all about life somewhere after life here, something in our minds and hearts.

What is not accepted quite so gladly is folk committed to a reality,

incarnated in Jesus' resurrection,

that's right here in the middle of this world,

and that Jesus' followers are unstoppably motivated to work for, here. And now.

Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom? These redemption songs?

Perhaps you read this week, as I did, about the Slave Bible⁴, which was first published in 1807 in London for use in worship by enslaved people in British West Indies. The producers had 2 goals:

to introduce Christianity to enslaved persons, and

to preserve the system of slavery.

So, they redacted out the Exodus story, and every mention of it, fearing that this story might sow seeds of possibilities, if not rebellion.

Two days ago, Jewish people around the world sad at Seder and told the story

"not as a remembrance of a one-time event

but as an eternal promise,

a frame of reference for all future struggles —

*including those we face in our time and our own country.*⁵

Of course, they should've left out the resurrection story, too. (Perhaps they'd taught the resurrection as simply about heaven for so long that they failed to notice liberation at its core.)

This is the Story we tell, and like the Exodus, it is never simply a remembrance,

but is always an eternal promise, and a frame of reference for all struggles.

Resurrection and redemption are **then**, and **now**, and **ongoing**, and **future**...they are as real as our bodies, as the earth itself....they are **here**, and **there**....

Esau McCaulley understands the radical nature of the resurrection of Jesus,

⁴ <https://www.museumofthebible.org/exhibits/slave-bible>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/opinion/passover-exodus-story-redemption.html>

of the continuity between heaven and earth, writing,

“What is compelling to me is the clear teaching that our ethnicities are not wiped away at the resurrection. Jesus was raised with his brown, Middle Eastern, Jewish body.

When my body is raised, it will be a Black body. One that is honored alongside bodies of every hue and color. The resurrection of Black bodies will be the definitive rejection of all forms of racism. At the end of the Christian story, I am not saved from my Blackness. It is rendered everlasting. Our bodies, liberated and transfigured but still Black, will be the eternal testimony to our worth.⁶

When we sing Easter songs, we testify that any moment may be **THE MOMENT** between oppression and liberation.

Any moment may be **THE MOMENT** between degradation and dignity.

Redemption songs are a way of transmitting hope through generations; when we tell these stories, we resist the stories that others tell.

Easter Songs have been sung for generations. We have received redemption songs from those who have gone before us, whose resurrection is made complete.

And we sing, not for our lives only, but for those who come after us.

Mary sings one, before Jesus is even born, singing of God who looks with favor on lowliness, scatters the proud, brings down the powerful from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things.⁷

I’ve heard them, and seen them lived. I bet you have, too.

Bryan Stevenson⁸ - dedicated his career to helping the poor, especially the incarcerated, and the condemned...and is also unwilling to give up on grace. “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.”

Darnella Frazier, who filmed George Floyd’s death

⁶ “What Good Friday and Easter Mean for Black Americans,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/opinion/easter-resurrection-good-friday.html>

⁷ from the Magnificat, (Luke 1:46ff)

⁸ <https://eji.org/bryan-stevenson/>

Singspiration on Arctic Coast

18-year fight for **Fairbanks Four** release⁹

Ukrainian Dinner - gathering in solidarity and hope, resisting, holding on....

We hear Easter Songs wherever we see Resistance. Liberation. Life-Giving. Resilience.

When Truth is spoken, especially to Power.

When amends are made. Reparations offered. When power is distributed. When a new course is charted that brings together those who have been alienated.

In a gentle invitation from a biracial terminally ill man who grew up in abject poverty, "won't you help to sing?"

In the resurrection story in Luke, the women are asked,

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Why, indeed?

As we sing Redemption Songs,

we will not be daunted by signs of death and symbols of power

nor will we be overwhelmed by what is.

As we sing, we live,

we look for the living,

we proclaim God's *YES* to every *no* that ignores the image of God in every person and to all of creation

we invite others to sing with us, too.

This is a redemption that transforms the oppressed, of course--

and also transforms oppressors,

who need to be liberated from justifying cruelty and cruel systems.

⁹ <https://www.tananachiefs.org/fairbanks-four-timeline/>

The invitation to redemption is an invitation to a world set right, a world in which “dignity is stretched out like a blanket over the cosmos.”¹⁰

We don't do “altar calls” at St. Mary's, but we *do* invite you....

- We invite you to follow Jesus out of the grave into this world
 - into a practice of radical kindness and trust in God
 - into Love that is powerful and revolutionary

- We invite you to join with us in hope, resistance, working for change, singing Life, and risking delight.
 - *“We must risk delight....We must have/ the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless/ furnace of this world. To make injustice the only/ measure of our attention is to praise the Devil....We must admit there will be music despite everything.”¹¹*

It's time, time to sing redemptions songs, Easter Songs,
to sing for our lives,
and for others' lives, too.

Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?

Songs of Lavish Love,
of Abundant Beauty,
of the Boundless Power of Love that knows no end....

¹⁰ *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*, by Cole Arthur Riley.

¹¹ From “A Brief For The Defense,” in *Collected Poems*, by Jack Gilbert. © 2012 by Jack Gilbert.