

**April 5, 2015 ❁ And Still We Rise**

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*"The thing about rising is we have to continue upward;  
the thing about going beyond is we have to keep going."*

~ Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things*

**Reading** by Roger A. Cowan

And so we come on our donkeys,  
Some from Detroit and some from Tokyo and even a few from Seoul.  
With horns blaring and brakes screeching,  
We enter the city, the holy of holies.  
We know what Caesar wants:  
Testing ranges and new arenas while the homeless haunt church basements  
and the poor shuffle in the streets.  
But we march to a different drummer.  
Not many rich, not many mighty.  
A vagabond crew in a strange land,  
Whose ways are not our ways  
Nor thoughts our thoughts.  
But let us be of good cheer.  
Let the word go out.  
The donkey is mightier than the missile.  
And flowers have been known to split a rock.  
This week moves inexorably toward Friday.  
It is Caesar's week.  
But it is God's world.  
And so we take heart and rejoice.

**Sermon:** "And Still We Rise"

It is Caesar's week. But it's God's world.

It was Caesar's week: Tiberius Caesar, Roman Emperor until year 37 of the Common Era.  
But there are always Caesars — and they're not always human.

"We know what Caesar wants," writes the late Roger Cowan, "Testing ranges and new arenas while the homeless haunt church basements and the poor shuffle in the streets."

"Caesar" can be the forces of greed, and indifference to those with little power. "Caesar" is systemic racism and oppression that flourishes while the nation is distracted and

drugged by reality TV. “Caesar” is the human impulse toward violence, toward the narrowing of borders, the pushing out and making “other.”

It has been Caesar’s week. It is always, in some form or another, Caesar’s week, and we know what the machine wants: to extinguish the light; to deny the inherent wholeness of every person; to squelch the ways that we heal one another, redeem one another, and save one another.

But it is God’s world, and Caesar’s power is not the only power that matters.

It’s the world of the Holy; a world of transcendence, of wonder,  
of rising above Caesar’s harshness and pettiness.

It is a world that grants us each untested agency where, in just about any moment,  
we can invite healing and connection to spark between beings.

Ours is a world wrapped in invisible cords of love and of grace:  
stretchy, bungee-like cords that expand to hold us, just as we are,  
even when we declare ourselves unlovable  
or think we’ve made a mistake that’s unforgivable.

“It is God’s world” means that when we feel stuck inside an old story  
or a prison of our own making,  
the always mysterious and sometimes miraculous truth of love is available to us,  
and the possibility of our own private resurrections.



In the Christian tradition, last Sunday was Palm Sunday.  
That narrative — in all four gospels, which is rare, so you know it’s important —  
tells us that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and was greeted by adoring crowds.

This rabbi, this teacher was known and loved.

His ministry tapped into people’s deep hunger for truth.  
It was said that he could coax the unimaginable into happening:  
where there was illness, his touch brought healing;  
where there was hunger, his suggestion brought forth food.

His teachings — often conveyed through quirky parables — were compelling, and so  
substantial that they brought people out of their homes and into the streets and hillsides;  
they were so subversive that even as he and his fellow itinerant disciples  
settled into their Passover seder meal,

his trial and execution had been planned by the Powers That Be.

“Power doesn’t have to be fierce,” writes Elizabeth Gilbert.<sup>1</sup>

It doesn’t have to be aggressive or combative or cocky. It doesn’t have to tear anything down. It doesn’t have to be in your face. It doesn’t have to be a moment of fist-pumping victory. It doesn’t have to be expensive or monumental. It doesn’t have to make the world explode.

This teacher, this prophet, was a living message:  
there is a different, deeper form of power.

We can’t know the precise form that form his message took — in Aramaic, of course — but his teachings and stories gave voice to these truths:

*There’s unconditional mercy for those who are afraid in pain.*

*No matter how fractured you are, or once were, there is wholeness at your core.*

*There’s always more room at the table, especially for those were once pushed away.*

*It’s possible to experience all of these things, and more, all of the time. When you forget, I’ll remind you.*

As he made his way into Jerusalem, people lined the streets to greet him. His followers even found him a donkey — a sign of respect, the first-century equivalent of a limousine — so that he wouldn’t dirty his feet or tire his legs.

Jesus entered Jerusalem, and he’d already entered Caesar’s sights.

It didn’t matter that he was “a small-town peasant in a... province far from the centers of political and religious power... [his] popularity, combined with the gathering perhaps hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover, would have made Roman authorities very nervous.”<sup>2</sup>

Caesar, and his Judean governor Pilate, ruled by fear, grasped at power, and ended up creating an unstoppable force: a beacon of light — one of many — that points to a different way,

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<sup>1</sup> Facebook thread: <https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/photos/pb.227291194019670.-2207520000.1428104807./774445145970936/?type=3&theater>

<sup>2</sup>Mary Hinkle Shore. See <http://www.enterthebible.org/blog.aspx?m=3783&post=2496>.

and to a world where the power of the Holy and of the human family “moves in freedom, through freedom, and toward freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

They put Jesus to death because he was too big a threat,  
too unsettling a messenger, too disruptive to the empire.

His welcome was too large, his embrace too wide,  
his rejection of the status quo too blatant.  
“All he did was love. And heal. And give people hope.”<sup>4</sup>



This message embodies power *with* (rather than power *over*);  
a giving power to (rather than taking it away).

This message reminds people of their own agency,  
their own capacities, and their own possibilities.

And it seems to me that that spirit is alive and among us  
when we offer to it to one another  
just as Jesus’ disciples offered it to one another  
in the days following his death,  
experiencing him as still present among them.

The spirit is alive and among us when we name it and pass it around our circle,  
much like the Passover Seder —  
the telling and retelling of the Israelites’ escape from slavery —  
reminds every listener, “this is what we’re still trying to create here, and now.”

We offer this living power to one another when we bear witness to each others’ dyings,  
and give each other strength and hope in resurrection:  
the truth that we can transcend brokenness  
and make whole persons of ourselves.  
“Death does not get the last word.”<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Jake Morrill, personal communication.

<sup>4</sup> “Holy Week in an Unholy World,” by Shane Claiborne: [www.redletterchristians.org/holy-week-in-an-unholy-world/](http://www.redletterchristians.org/holy-week-in-an-unholy-world/)

<sup>5</sup> Claiborne.

By now, I've learned many of your stories;  
one of the greatest gifts of being a pastor is being trusted by the people you serve  
to hear and hold the tellings of how you arrived at this place,  
and what you've learned along the way —  
about life,  
and about how you've stitched together  
the fragments of your broken hearts.

We've all known brokenness.  
Our life experiences have taught us that dying happens in many small ways.  
Each of us has encountered sorrows or pain that drained the life-force from us —  
and friends, some of you know that when the spirit dies,  
it's as though a living, breathing, functioning body doesn't matter.

Through happenstance, addiction, greed, or the same human betrayal that led to Jesus' death, many of us have been taken down into the valley of death... and learned that life is on the other side —  
in a different form, not the same was it was before, but: life.

Many of us have learned that being reborn happens over and over, too, although sometimes without glorious witness and a fanfare of Alleluias.



The writer Elizabeth Gilbert has a robust and inspiring presence on social media, which she uses in kick-butt ways to cultivate community. She frequently asks her followers questions, genuinely hoping for heartfelt dialogue.

Recently she said to her online community: "I want you to do me a favor today. I want you to post a picture of yourself taken at a moment when you felt like you were at your most powerful."<sup>6</sup>

What would you expect?

I'm embarrassed to say that I expected responses that ranged from shallow to cheesy. What I actually witnessed, in real time, was staggering and humbling. Photo after photo — hundreds and hundreds of them — popped into the feed. Most of them bore some explanation; all of them moved me to tears:

✿ This is me walking my daughter down the aisle at her wedding, alone, after raising her as a single parent.

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook thread: <https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/photos/pb.227291194019670.-2207520000.1428104807./774445145970936/?type=3&theater>

- ✿ This is me at the kitchen table, nearly 3 months sober. I live alone and could never stand the loneliness (and all of those things that I tried to bury by drinking). On this night, instead of eating a horrible dinner standing up at the counter, I cooked, I sat at the dinner table to eat felt like I was truly making progress. I could stand to be alone with myself.
- ✿ This photo is me standing a year after a drunk driver nearly took my life. It was a battle against odds. He didn't kill me and he doesn't get to take my life or my passion. I lost the ability to walk in stilettos but I got a life of gratitude and a heart that still loves.
- ✿ This is me in the empty living room of a house I moved into after leaving a marriage in which I was abused for 12 years.
- ✿ This is me going for a walk, one month after our daughter was stillborn at 37 weeks... I decided to start walking every day. So I bundled myself up, put on sunglasses so I could secretly cry if I needed to, and took my life back into my own hands.
- ✿ I thought about posting a picture of myself flying an Airbus (I'm an airline pilot)... But the day I felt most empowered was the day I kicked cancer to the curb. This picture was taken the day after my surgery.
- ✿ Denying who I was for most of my life in part to religious shaming, at the age of 33 I "came out" and instantly felt the most confident and at ease with myself than I'd been in my whole life.
- ✿ This is the tattoo of a phoenix, rising from the ashes, that I got after surviving the worst year of my life.

There were the pictures, the voices, the stories of survivors:  
 ordinary women and men who were robbed of life, or hope,  
 and then restored to their power through means both miraculous and ordinary.

That's resurrection: refuting crisis and the shame it might entail;  
 allowing ourselves to be loved back into being and healed back into wholeness.

I have a story like that — and so do most of you.  
 I have at least one story, maybe more,  
 about believing that everything had ended because I felt dead on the inside,  
 but slowly being restored to life by the power that transcends:  
 the generative, connecting, giving-one-another-strength power.

I believe that we share that power-with,  
and empower others' coming back to life,  
by telling our stories and reminding one another of what's possible.

We're partners in each others' rising above, and rising from,  
the small deaths our souls have known.



In their book *Saving Paradise*, contemporary theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker<sup>7</sup> remind readers that in those times, “crucifixion... was Rome’s most horrifying and humiliating form of capital punishment.” (Then, as now, Palestinian culture centered around honor and shame.) But...

The Passion narratives broke silence about the shame and fear that crucifixion instilled. [They claimed] powers that crucifixion was designed to destroy: dignity, courage, love, creativity, and truth-telling. In telling his story, his community remembered his name and claimed the death-defying power of saying his name out loud....

To break silence whenever violence is used to shame, instill fear, fragment human community, or suppress those who advocate for justice is life-giving... Life is found in surviving the worst a community can imagine; in lamenting the consequences of imperialism; and in holding fast to the core goodness of this world, blessed by divine justice and abundant life.

It is God’s world. But the week ahead may very likely resemble Caesar’s week.

As you make your way through a hurting world,  
and especially if your own spirit is suffering a quiet death,  
may you hold these words close to your heart:

Dying and being reborn happens over and over;  
Caesar’s power is not the only kind that matters;

Resurrection begins when we hold fast to the core goodness of this world,  
and restore one another to the power that sustains life.

May it be so for all of us.

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<sup>7</sup> *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, p. 50-53.