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 Arlington Street Church
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**Easter:
 Change, then, Mourning into Praise**

The tomb was empty. If anyone tells you that every word of the Bible is true, you might ask them to explain how it is that the only thing on which Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all agree about Jesus' death is this:

The tomb was empty.

Unitarian Universalism is an “empty tomb” faith, a faith not of surety, but of mystery. Whatever else we do with that mystery, I invite you to a deep consideration of this question:

Whose tomb is empty because of the way you live your life?

On this Easter morning, fresh from last night's seder table, I want to borrow a word from the Passover Haggadah – the ritual retelling of the Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. The word is *Mitzrayim*. It means dire straits. *Mitzrayim* is a narrow place.

We read in the Haggadah that we are obligated to regard ourselves as if we ourselves had come forth out of Egypt.”¹ In other words, we are commanded to freedom, to the experience of the emergence from captivity, from lost to found. We are commanded to live, not in the tomb, not in *Mitzrayim*, but in freedom.

When Mary Magdalene and other women came to Jesus' tomb to prepare his body for burial, they were met by two men, dressed in dazzling raiments, who asked them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”²

What do the angels have to ask us today?

¹ *Pesachim* 10:5 and/or 116b

² Luke 24:1-5

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Skip tells me he was making his way through downtown crossing on a recent morning, feeling sad and sorry for himself, and already, it was not a good day. And then he happened on Charlie, whom some of you may know – Charlie, confined to a wheelchair; quadriplegic, and more – utterly paralyzed, actually, except that he can move his lips. That bleak morning, Skip heard someone call out, “Good morning, Charlie! How are you today?” And Charlie responded, “I can't complain.”

Skip's day changed, right then and there. Actually, his whole life changed. He emerged from the Mitzrayim – the narrow place – and decided to make a different choice about living and dying.

Laura Evonne Steinman's friend, filmmaker Barbara Center, is living with intractable lymphoma. The question arising from her cancer support group, she says, is not, “Why is this happening to me?” The question to live, Barbara Center says, is “Why is this happening *for* me?”

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How is it that you have emerged from the narrow place – the Mitzrayim?
Whose tomb is empty because of the way you live your life?

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Jesus had a lot to say about this gesture of freedom. Here is one of my favorite stories:

Jesus is teaching in the temple, in the mount of Olives, and the scribes and Pharisees bring him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery (I'm not sure where the guy is, but that's another story).

John writes, “... And when they had set her in the midst, they [said] to him, 'Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned. What do *you* say?’” In response, Jesus just stoops down and, without a word, begins writing with his finger in the dust on the floor.

But they keep pestering him, looking for his answer – an answer with which they hope to trap him and damn him for speaking in violation of the law.

Finally, Jesus stands up, and says to them, “He that is without sin among you, let

him cast the first stone.” And then he stoops down again, and resumes his writing.

John writes, “And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last, and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.”

And Jesus says to to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”

She replies, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.”³

Go, and sin no more. We can be released from the Mitzrayim of our poor choices, our misguided actions. We can begin again, now. We can empty someone's tomb by choosing differently. We can act honorably.

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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is making a lot of headlines. Two years ago, ten thousand, seven hundred, and fifty-six troops were diagnosed with it. Reliving traumatic experiences in a seemingly endless loop; anxiety; insomnia; an inability to regulate the fear response; and hyper-alertness will break many soldiers. Astonishingly, though, it will also make some of them; surviving their trauma is at the heart of the very best of who they become. Robert Tedeschi, a psychologist who studies resilience, has given this phenomenon a name: he calls it Post-Traumatic Growth.⁴

“Only a seismic event ... can lead to this kind of growth. By that, [Dr.] Tedeschi means an event that shakes you to your core, and causes you to question your fundamental assumptions about the world. Survivors of such severe trauma inevitably confront questions about existence that most of us avoid, and the potential for growth comes not from the event itself, but from the struggle to make sense of it... 'The challenge is to see the opportunities presented by this earthquake,' [he] says. 'Don't just rebuild the same ... building you had before. Why not build something better?!...’”

We know that “not everyone climbs out of despair changed for the better.” But as it turns out, “experiencing growth in the wake of trauma is far more common than PTSD.” The point is that “pain and suffering [can be] ... mechanisms for growth.” A

³ John 8: 1-11

⁴ The term Post-Traumatic Growth was coined by Tedeschi and psychologist Lawrence Calhoun.

significant number of trauma survivors march out of dire straits and choose a spacious, grace-filled life. They report feeling a renewed appreciation for life; experience new possibilities; feel more personal strength; improve their relationships; and feel more spiritually satisfied.⁵ Theirs is an empty tomb faith.

Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum is a physician, a pilot, and a competitive equestrian. In the first gulf war, serving as a flight surgeon on a Black Hawk helicopter, she was shot down during a rescue mission. She came to, pinned to the ground by the wreckage. Both arms were broken. Then she was taken a prisoner of war.

In her book *She Went to War*, Rhonda Cornum writes, “I was badly injured, but I knew that I would heal. The crash had been so devastating that I should have died ... and I regarded every minute I was alive as a gift. The Iraqis could have killed us when they found us, ... but they chose not to.... We had been spared. It was just good-enough luck for me to grab onto and ... hold. I vowed to survive.”⁶

When questioned about her line of reasoning, she laughs. “It's the only way I would think,” she says. “If you don't do that, why would you ever proceed with anything?”

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There are choices we make that signal a true change in direction in our lives. Sometimes, the path is literally before us: we take the road less taken. Spiritual freedom begins, though, with a vision – in the book of Proverbs, it is written, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”⁷ Our choice to be free begins in our minds, and in our hearts.

In the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is on the run with Jim, a runaway slave. Huck is frightened for his soul; he's been told that what he is doing is shameful, low-down, disgraceful, and wicked. Do you remember this? Hoping to relieve his tortured conscience, he decides to write a letter.

“Miss Watson,” he writes. “Your runaway [slave] Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

5 Dr. Richard Tedeschi in Jim Rendon, “Post-Traumatic Stress's Surprisingly Positive Flip Side,” in *The New York Times*, 3/22/12

6 Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, *She Went to War*

7 King Solomon, Proverbs 29:18

[signed,] “Huck Finn.”

He says, “I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life.... [I] laid the paper down and set there thinking.... And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; ... and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; ... and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.”

Huck Finn continues,

“It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, and then says to myself:

“All right, then, I'll *go* to hell.' – and tore it up.”⁸

The Mitzrayim opens. This is Huck's moment, not of damnation, but of salvation. The tomb is empty.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Easter calls us to a faith, not of surety, but of mystery.

May we, too, say, “I can't complain.”

May we, too, ask, not, “Why is this happening to me,”

but

“Why is this happening *for* me?”

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We are obligated to regard ourselves as if we ourselves had come forth out of Mitzrayim.

8 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (January, 1885), Chapter 31, pp. 283-285 or <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/huchompg.html>

Why not build something better?

Spiritual freedom begins with a vision.

May we choose to be free.

The tomb was empty.⁹

⁹ With many thanks to (in order of appearance) Kem Morehead, Skip, Joanna Lubkin, Jay Michaelson, and Rev. Carl Scovel.