

## Released

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, April 14, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Nehemiah 9:9-15](#) and [John 20:19-23](#)

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I began my sermon last week by quoting the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. I want to again, because she summed up in two sentences the core of Christianity, and she points us to what this worship series during the great 50 days of Easter is all about. Here's what she said:

“The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.”<sup>1</sup>

In the course of this worship series, we will get a chance to both hear from others and discover within ourselves the many ways we dig graves for ourselves, and the many ways God reaches into those graves to pull us out, giving us new life.

Our theme for this week is Release. Today we look at how resurrection comes in the form of release. Let's start with our reading from Nehemiah.

The historic setting for the book is the return from the Babylonian exile. It is about 70 years since the leaders of the Kingdom of Judah were first sent into exile when the Babylonian Empire conquered the country. The descendants of those who were exiled are finally being allowed to return and to reestablish themselves as a people and as a nation. Key to their identity is the story of the Exodus, the story of God intervening in history to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and into the land they thought of as promised. In our reading, Ezra, the high priest, reminds the people of this story.

Both stories have deep parallels and are both quite clearly stories of release. The Hebrew people were released from the bondage of slavery and led through the desert, finally arriving at their so-called “promised land.” A people held for generations in exile have been released and allowed to return to a land they had never been in, a land they nonetheless considered “promised” to them. God's hand was at work in the Exodus. God's hand is at work in the release from exile. The tasks of becoming a self-governing people are the same for the people of the Exodus and the people of the exile. In both stories, God is granting a newness of life, a resurrection of release to an entire people.

The people who experience a resurrection in our reading from the gospel of John is much smaller. In this story, it's easy to focus on the resurrection of Jesus. He's the central character. He's the one who has literally risen from the dead. And, as we will see, he's not the only one who experiences a resurrection. It's the evening of the day of Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene has had her dawn encounter with the resurrected Jesus at the tomb. She's told the disciples about it. Now, evening has come. The disciples have locked themselves away, John says, “where they had met.”

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<sup>1</sup> From a meme quoting Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, (New York: Jericho Books, 2013).

Diana Butler Bass interprets this to mean they had locked themselves away in the upper room where Jesus had washed their feet and where they had shared a last supper with him.<sup>2</sup> They are back in the room where Jesus gave them the mandate to love one another. But the doors are locked. They are afraid. John says the doors “were locked for fear of the Jews.”

Bass writes about this, too: “In recent decades, many liberal theologians and mainline preachers have gone to great lengths to minimize the antisemitism of John’s passion narrative, a story full of references to ‘the Jews.’ This year, my own pastor sent out a note to the congregation explaining (rightly) that during Holy Week we’d hear texts that mention ‘the Jews’ but those references really mean *the Jewish authorities who collaborated with the Romans*. The clarification is now fairly commonplace in mainline churches – which is a very good thing. Not all Jews, [only] certain Jewish enemy sympathizers.

“Thus, the opening words of Easter evening – *the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews* – are read softly, skipped over, or mentally reinterpreted to say ‘for fear of the Jewish authorities.’ We want to move on quickly, not dwell on this problematic phrase. Much better to put the emphasis on the end of the sentence: *Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’*

“Whew. Now we can breathe.

“But what if the writer – in this case at least – really meant ‘for fear of the Jews’? Why wouldn’t the author say Pilate’s men or the Roman soldiers if the disciples were afraid of the authorities? There were plenty of bad actors they might have feared.

“Why ‘for fear of the Jews’? That’s odd given the fact that **all the disciples locked in the room were themselves Jews**. Were they afraid of their own people? Were they afraid of *themselves*?”<sup>3</sup>

Are you ever afraid of yourself?

I know there have been times I’ve been afraid of my grief. I’ve been afraid that if I really allowed myself to feel how deep a grief was, I might never surface again. And I’ve been afraid of my own anger – afraid that if I really felt it, I couldn’t control it and that it would explode destructively.

Are you ever afraid of yourself?

My older sister celebrated a 30th anniversary last month. I got her permission to talk about it today. She’s been sober for 30 years. As we looked at the John passage during Monday Morning Bible Study, I wondered if my sister was ever afraid of herself, afraid that she might drink again. So, I called her up and we had a beautiful conversation about it.

Sally, my sister, said the fear she has of herself is not that she’ll drink. Her fear is, as she put it, that she’ll act like a jerk. Let me explain. We’ve all been in situations we can’t control. Sally’s old script – the script that goes back to her childhood – tells her, when she faces something she can’t control, to act out in a way that she subsequently sees as “acting

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “The door was locked. Until it wasn’t,” *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-4c2> (posted and accessed 7 April 2024).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

like a jerk.” Then, because she’s acted like a jerk, she feels shame. And when she feels shame, she wants to anesthetize hit. And her anesthetic of choice is alcohol. She knows that when she acts like a jerk, she’ll end up wanting to drink. Thus, Sally’s fear of herself takes the form of fearing that she’ll act like a jerk.

The first three steps of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are sometimes paraphrased, “I can’t; God can; I think I’ll let him.” More formally, they are (and I’m using the traditional language of AA even though it genders God as masculine):

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

The AA “big book,” as it’s called, offers a specific prayer to help ground the third step: “God, I offer myself to Thee – To build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of Life. ‘

When I told my sister the theme for today was “release,” she immediately thought of this prayer. She thought specifically of the line, “relieve me of the bondage of self.” The line could easily have been, “Release me from the bondage of self.”

Sally says that her sobriety started by her thinking her partner’s alcohol use was the problem. Then she accepted that her alcohol use might be the problem. The breakthrough happened when she realized, “I am the problem. “Not the alcohol,” she told me. “I am the problem. So I need to change. And I can’t change me. God can.” Those are the first three steps. Steps 4 to 12, Sally told me, are all about letting God change us.

I asked Sally what release from the bondage of self looks like to her now. She says it’s about not having undue attention on herself, and she does that by “helping the next guy,” to use her words. In that action, the action of helping the next guy, she discovers the wisdom and truth in one of the lines from the prayer of Saint Francis: it is in giving that we receive.

The fear of the Jews that John says the disciples were feeling that night may have been a bondage of self. They locked the doors to keep others out. And to keep themselves in. Jesus got through the locked doors. And when he did, he stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” And after he showed them his wounds, he said to them again, “Peace be with you.” And he added, “As the father has sent me, so I send you.”

Be released from this tomb. Be released from the tomb of exile. Be released from the tomb of fear. Be released from the tomb of the bondage of self.

“As the father has sent me, so I send you: go and help the next guy.”

In this time of quiet reflection, I invite you to think about the resurrection power of release. Has this look at the resurrection power of release unlocked one of your resurrection stories? How might you speak up and share this good news?