

Is Jesus Risen?  
A Homily by the Reverend Diane Teichert  
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Easter raises questions about the meaning of the story of Jesus. Is Easter to us just another rite of spring and renewal, a celebration of new life? Or can we also find meaning in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Why did the followers of Jesus say he reappeared to them in person after his death? They said they were walking down the road and all of a sudden, he was walking with them; then he vanishes. They said he had been raised from the dead. Christians celebrate Easter as the day of his resurrection.

Is Jesus, indeed, risen?

Kenneth Patton, the adamant humanist, the Universalist minister whose words can be found in many of the hymns and readings in our hymnal, responds to the question this way:

You can know this only if you have raised him within yourself. The question is this: Have I brought Jesus to life within me? Does his spirit work in my ways, in my thoughts, in my feelings? Does his courage survive in my courage?...Is Jesus risen? He is if you are a maker of peace. He is if you love your enemies; if you forgive and labor to make things right between you and your brothers and sisters. He is if you have conquered hatred in your heart and replaced it with love. He is if you love truth and goodness with all your thoughts and actions. Jesus is risen if people look at you and are reminded somewhat of Jesus by the way you live.

In Maya Angelou's book of essays, Wouldn't Take Nothing for my Journey Now, there's a passage which may be especially appropriate on Easter. Maya Angelou writes that she is "taken aback" if someone walks up to her and tells her they are a Christian.

She says her first response to them is the incredulous question "Already?"

It seems to her that it is a lifelong endeavor to become a Christian. Just as it is a lifelong endeavor to live the life of a Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Hindu or that of any faith path...Unitarian Universalist, too.

Isn't each a state we try to become...more than it is something we are? Although we Unitarian Universalists do not subscribe to creeds which define us, a quick review of our Principles and Purposes printed on the back cover of your bulletin reminds me of this: that even though I call myself a Unitarian Universalist, it is more truthful to say I am trying to be one. Angelou writes as so many philosophers do, "The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held onto eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy."

So, is Jesus risen?

I well remember encountering that question in a conversation on Easter many years ago. I spoke without thinking. Sometimes I do that! Sometimes I regret it, too.

But, other times, if I stop to think about what I just said, something new is revealed to me. A theological revelation, you might say.

That happened to me on the Easter following my father's death, which would be twenty-one years ago today.

I exclaimed indignantly to someone, "I don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead any more than I believe my father rose from the dead."

It was my experience, you see, that after seeing my father so thin, so ill with cancer, so wanting for it to end... being with him as he hovered in unreal spaces, as he said his good-byes and we ours... his pain, my pain, everyone's pain and sorrow...after essentially begging from the depths of my soul that he die, when he was dead, there was his body... But where was he?

So, after speaking without thinking that first Easter after his death, I began to think. Perhaps the expression "he is risen" isn't meant to mean the supernatural, contrary to science occurrence we think of when we hear the words "The Resurrection."

Perhaps it is simply a description of the experience of being with the body of a person or pet you have loved whose spirit, whose essence, no longer resides there.

Where did it go? Well, it rose out of him or her with their last breath, and was gone. He, who he was, had risen.

So, too, they said, "Jesus is risen." His spirit was gone. Maybe that is all that they meant. And then his followers' love for him was so intense, their involvement with him so real to them, that they experienced him again as if alive, even though they had seen him die on a cross with their own eyes.

Although I have not experienced my father's presence after his death in that way, one hears that people do sometimes feel the presence of a deceased loved one.

What I *have* experienced is an ongoing process, not always conscious, of integrating into my own life who my father was to me, what I understand of his strengths and weaknesses, his hopes, his fears, what he loved, what baffled him. What he gave me, what he didn't, the good and the bad. I am raising the best of him within myself.

Maybe your dog died and you really miss him. Maybe you remember the way he rushed up to greet you when you came home from school or work. Maybe you remember that when he did that you felt so lovable. If you allow that feeling of being lovable to rise up in you every time you remember your dog, then you are raising him within yourself.

Or maybe your Grandma died. You really loved her. You remember how she made peanut butter cookies with you when you visited her. So, you ask your mom or dad to help you bake peanut butter cookies and then it becomes a tradition to do that every year on her birthday, and it keeps alive in you and your parents what a really generous person she was.

Kenneth Patton said, "You can only know if Jesus is risen if you have raised him within yourself."

So, is Jesus risen? He is... if we try to be like him, if we follow his teachings. He is risen in us if we are peace and justice makers. He is risen if we love our neighbors and ourselves, if we forgive and labor to make things right among ourselves and with others. He is risen if we love truth and goodness with all our thoughts and actions. Jesus is risen if people look at us and are reminded somewhat of Jesus by the way we live.

What's important about the Easter story isn't the miracle involving Jesus coming alive after he was dead. What's more important is that his disciples, his followers were inspired by his life to raise him within themselves after his death, and to teach and preach to others what he taught and preached to them, his message of love.

But what's most important, and worthy of singing "Alleluia, Alleluia" is when his courage and love survives in our courage and love! Alleluia, Alleluia!

So, the most important part of the story is that we be inspired too!

Amen.