

What Did Jesus Do *After* the Resurrection?

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

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How do you feel about resurrection? Do you welcome it into your own life, or do you doubt its possibility? Do you look for resurrection, the promise that things do get better, that spring returns, and that death does not have the final say?

When we translate resurrection as revival or waking, as rebirth or renewal, as renaissance or new beginning, we've all experienced resurrection. Those synonyms are all taken from the Microsoft thesaurus.

Resurrection of hope, of meaning in our life after a loved one has died or after a job has ended, or any time we pick up after any loss—the possibility of resurrection is there. It is real and it can be scary. It can feel easier and safer to stay in the tomb where no one can hurt us or see us in our new life. And that's okay. Take the time you need to feel your way into what is new.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister and devout believer in the value of religious pluralism, I look for the good in all religions—and they all have much to offer. This is a time in our lives and in the life of our country to see the good in all religions including Christianity and not let it be defined by those who are defiling it or distorting it to their own purpose. So let us consider Easter from those places, being open to its meaning and possibilities, and reclaiming the actual messages of this young rabbi, Jesus.

As Unitarian Universalists we can get so hung up on *whether* Jesus was resurrected that we miss the point. We hear that "Jesus appeared" and we stop reading the story. We close the book and begin to debate, or worse, become cynical and all-knowing. We don't allow the teachings that follow to challenge and comfort us.

When we close the book we miss a third of the Easter story, which happens after the women see Jesus. My friends, I'm inviting us today to stop the debate about whether the resurrection happened and to listen instead to what follows, for the resurrection story has rich meaning.

Who among us has not felt the love, maybe

even the presence, of someone who has died... the confidence that your grandfather had for you as you start your first day at work...the love of your sister or best friend when you are feeling lonely...the passion and conviction of your college roommate who died too young?

Experiencing connection to loved ones who have died is commonplace and accepted as meaningful and helpful. We don't ask each other when these things happen, "Are you sure that was true?" Instead, we usually say something like, "I'm so glad you had that experience. Listen to your beloved who has died. They are still with you, and they love you. Their wisdom lives on."

I don't believe it matters if the resurrection is true, symbolic, or poetic and I don't think that is the point Jesus was trying to make. Much of what people don't believe in the New Testament are things Jesus never said. He never said he was God, after all.

So let us keep reading today and hear what happens after the stone was rolled away from the tomb.

Peace be with you.

These were the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples after the resurrection. He said these words several other times over the course of the forty days he remained before his alleged ascension into heaven.

The Gospel of John outlines eight appearances that he made including to his beloved Mary Magdala, his disciples, and a group of very hungry people.

Jesus conveyed seven primary messages in those appearances. He taught: peace be with you; hold on to what you believe, even in the face of seemingly impossible odds; do what is right; care for one another; forgive; and trust you will have the energy, stamina, and inspiration you need to follow your true path.

I'll offer you my interpretations of these messages. Other churches have different interpretations.

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Peace Be with You—the message he conveyed to his followers and others. What Jesus is affirming in these words is that inner peace is possible. He didn't promise that he would end wars. He taught us the way to end them if we choose.

Jesus instructed his followers to believe in him and his teachings, especially when there is no evidence to believe. He said, *Hold on to what you believe, even in the face of seemingly impossible odds.*

During his seven-year ministry before his crucifixion, Jesus taught nonviolence. This is irrefutable. Christians turned away from this teaching starting in 313 AD when the Christian church became the army. As Richard Rohr says, "Once you are the army, you cannot see Jesus' teachings without that lens. None of the Christian nations have a record of peacekeeping, none. We have to turn to Mennonites, Quakers and Amish to see that."¹

Jesus lived in a time of great war and oppression and taught about the need for nonviolence and inner peace to create outer peace.

His teachings were about radical inclusion, eradication of systems of oppression, and caring for one another, especially those in need. No one was excluded from Jesus' table, teachings, or love. He welcomed women, outcasts, and those with mental illnesses. He even welcomed those on the other side of his "party line." No one was excluded.

During the forty days that he is said to have been resurrected, he reminded his followers to believe in what he taught, even if there was no evidence of coming to pass. *Do what is right.*

Care for one another. Another story during the forty days tells us that Jesus fed 500 hungry people with three fish. Again, many people focus on if this is even possible. What if, instead, we look for the message in that story?

I believe he was telling us to care for one another. Feed the hungry and trust that in so doing there will be enough for everyone. Instead, we hoard food.

Another story about caring for one another starts with Jesus challenging some of his disciples about their belief in him. He asked three of them if they knew who he was. Each answered more affirmatively than the last. After the third time, Jesus said, "Well, if this is true, that you believe in me, leave this space. Go out and care for one another. Stop the intellectual debates. Help others."

Another teaching Jesus taught in his ministry and his resurrection was forgiveness. *Forgive* others, for they can't know what they don't know.

Rather than casting out his doubting and deceiving disciples or returning evil to those who treated him with disdain, Jesus taught people to carry on with dignity, and to not give other people the power to rob you of your joy.

Finally, he promised his followers that if they stayed true to their values based on his teachings of love, inclusivity, radical hospitality, and peace, that *they would receive the inspiration and stamina they needed to live out those values.*

When they were tired, they would somehow connect to the energy necessary to go on. When they were lost for words, the words would come. When they didn't see a way forward, a way would be shown if they paused and went inside for clarity.

Jesus called this the Holy Spirit. You can call it compassion, inspiration, the breath of life, the mystery of the Universe, or love. Whatever you call it, it is real.

Jesus asked us to draw the circle wide, to love and care for one another, to forgive each other's humanness and mistakes. Be at peace inside of yourself and create peace on earth, hold on to what you believe, be true to your values, and trust that you will have the energy and stamina you need. Jesus' life was an example of working for equality and justice and not responding to evil with evil, though he did occasionally get mad.

If Jesus were alive in a different time, like now for example, I know he would be an avid environmentalist, peace activist, and committed to protecting women, BIPOC people, and Trans and other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

1 Richard Rohr, Easter sermon.

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Just like other great spiritual teachers including the Buddha, Kwan Yin, and John Lewis, Jesus would be relentless in his belief that change is possible if we work for it, together.

Living this way shows others an alternative response to hatred, fallacy, and oppression.

I don't know if the young rabbi Jesus would be affiliated with any religion were he alive today. He wasn't in his lifetime. I do believe he would continue walking his talk and I believe his teachings have a lot to offer us.

So, this Easter, I invite us to move beyond the debate about whether the resurrection is true and consider instead what we might learn from this rabbi's teachings and how we might apply them in our lives, regardless of our theological beliefs.

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton says, "This is how we must approach resurrection... Let it grow on you."

Amen.

Happy Easter!

Peace be with You.