

Easter: A Story of Love and Hope

April 17, 2022

Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

We know very little about the historical Jesus. Much of what we do know is based on the canonical Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and the writings of St. Paul. Who Jesus is perceived to be- has transformed across time through differing interpretations of his life and ministry.

This morning being Easter morning, let's look at these five early Christian writers, and what they felt happened on that first Easter morning. First, they all believed in the resurrection of Jesus, some in resurrection not only of Jesus's spirit or soul, but his body as well.

St. Paul - even though he never met Jesus, felt that he had Jesus's authorization to be one of his apostles, as he famously experienced, in his words, "a revelation of Jesus Christ" on the road to Damascus.

St. Paul interpreted the resurrection of Jesus as solely as an imperishable, spiritual body.¹

Some, in the early church, however, believed not only as St. Paul in the resurrection of Jesus's spirit/soul, but of Jesus's body as well. So, there was this early tension between Hellenistic thought, represented by St. Paul, versus some of the early Jewish Christian writers who believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, not only in spirit, but also in body.

While the Jewish tradition at the time Jesus lived believed that death meant the end of a person, if a person was "resurrected" – this meant to these Hebrew believers that life was given back to the dead person.

We can find within the Hebrew Scriptures at the time of Jesus's ministry, some stories of resurrection that people living then most likely knew well.

For example, the raising of the dead is found in the story of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Another example is found in the second century B.C.E. in the Book of Daniel²:

Listen to this passage from Daniel:

"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, And some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and forever."

In the Wisdom of Solomon³, written in the first century B.C.E., we find another reference to the belief in life after death: *"the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God."*

¹ I Corinthians, 15:42-51

² Thanks to UU Minister John Buehrens for these Biblical references. Found in his book *Understanding the Bible*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Pp 160-168. Quote from The Book of Daniel, 12: 2-3.

³ Buehrens, p. 162. Quote from The Wisdom of Solomon, 3:1.

In the Hebrew Bible only two figures actually are said to go directly to God in bodily form: Enoch, the seventh Patriarch in the following quote from the book of Genesis:

“And Enoch walked with God. And he was not, for God took him.”

And the second person is Elijah⁴, a prophet and miracle worker who lived in the northern kingdom around the 9th century B.C.E. Elijah was known for healing those who were ill and restoring the dead to life.

Like Elijah, we find in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke the story of Jesus raising from the dead the daughter of Jarius, ruler of the synagogue.

And in the Book of John we can read the famous story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Here we discover John’s belief about resurrection, when in John’s Gospel Jesus says to Mary, sister of Lazarus, *“your brother will rise again.”* And Mary replies: *“I know he will rise in the resurrection at the last day.”* Jesus then says, *“I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes, in me shall never die.”*⁵

For John, Jesus’s resurrection went beyond the other Gospel writers’ belief in Jesus’s resurrection -theirs being for the vindication of a good person, falsely accused and then killed.

For John, Jesus’s death and then resurrection is based on John’s belief in the uniqueness of Jesus as a person who came from God and returned to God through the resurrection. In John’s Gospel Jesus appears on earth as a divine redeemer, who will ascend again.

UU Minister John Buehrens writes that thus we have two early Christian interpretations of Jesus’s death and resurrection.

“First, in his resurrection a just God vindicates the death of a righteous, innocent man and sets right the injustice and tragedy of his crucifixion.

Second, the resurrection proves that Jesus was not merely himself but a figure with a larger world-historical role – the harbinger of the End Time and the first of those to be raised to eternal life.”⁶

Imagine with me what it must have been like for those followers closest to Jesus. First, they entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, in hopes of bringing the Kingdom of God into fruition.

One likely consistent message of Jesus’s ministry is that the Kingdom of God is about to arrive, and perhaps the hope of the band around Jesus was that this was about to become reality.

When Jesus was arrested, and then crucified, his disciples scattered in fear and disbelief.

And then, three days later some of the disciples as well as women who followed Jesus, report experiencing Jesus among them.

This dramatic turn of events may have affirmed for those present the promise of the messianic age and the vindication of their righteous leader -Jesus, who in their eyes had risen from the dead.

The evangelist Mark predicts such post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in Galilee at the end of his Gospel.

⁴ 1 Kings 17: 17-24. 2 Kings 4:31-37; 13-20-21.

⁵ The Gospel of John 11: 23-26.

⁶ John Buehrens. Pp. 162-163.

However, he provides no examples of the apostles or others talking with the risen Christ.

The Gospel writer Matthew tells us stories of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances and these do occur in Galilee, - while Luke and John report of Jesus's appearances in Jerusalem.

All of the Gospels name women as the first witnesses to see the risen Jesus. In honor of these women, our opening hymn this morning is of Mary Magdalene approaching Jesus's tomb on Easter morning, intent on giving Jesus a proper Jewish burial, carrying herbs and ointments. She and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women that were with Mary finding the tomb empty, run to tell the apostles.

Not surprisingly in a patriarchal society, we are told in Luke 24 that the women were not believed –

This scripture says: "*their words seemed as idle tales and they believed them not,*"

But then Peter runs into the tomb and discovers "*the clothes laid by themselves, and leaves, wondering in himself that which has come to pass.*"⁷

Later that same day, on the road to Emmaus, two of the disciples were talking about their sadness over the death of Jesus, when, as the Gospel writer Luke tells this famous Easter story, the risen Jesus joined them. The two disciples did not recognize Jesus at first, but did when they arrived at the village and Jesus "*took the bread, and blessed it, and broke it and gave to them. And their eyes were opened.*"⁸ And then, as the story goes, Jesus disappeared and the two disciples returned to Jerusalem and told the other disciples what they had seen.

The belief by Jesus's early followers that he was raised from the dead allowed for the community to continue, in spite of the loss of their holy leader.

For those who believed in Jesus's resurrection, this indeed was a sign of how close the Kingdom of God was. And this sense that the Kingdom of God was near, enlivened the disciples to spread the news of Jesus's ministry far and wide.

While the original band of Christ's followers stood within the bounds of traditional Judaism, including Jesus himself, when they began to prophesy about the "glorious second coming" of their vindicated leader, they met with hostility from members in the Jewish religion who believed quite differently.

By the end of the first century, what eventually transpired was that the Christian faith moved on, especially through the evangelism of St. Paul, to repudiate the Torah, and trace the origins of their Christian faith not to Jewish roots, but back to the original apostolic community.

Jesus's followers viewed his resurrection by the end of the 1st century as proof of what they believed Jesus most likely taught: the Kingdom was at hand and Jesus was its unique messenger. The idea was that Jesus would return again, what is called his Parousia, -Jesus would then do what was predicted for a messiah within the Jewish tradition – establish the Kingdom of God.

Paula Fredriksen, biblical scholar writes that faith in a coming messiah (as opposed to faith in the Temple authorities) was already known within the early Christian world.

⁷ Luke 24: 11-12

⁸ Luke 24: 13-31

She writes:

*The various elements of the primitive Christology already existed in early Jewish thought, especially apocalyptic: the messiah would come, perhaps on the night of Passover; his coming would herald the arrival of God's kingdom; with the Kingdom would come the resurrection of the dead; before it comes, the righteous will suffer ...*⁹

The ancient world held many interpretations of Jesus's resurrection.

And such interpretations continue to this very day.

I well remember doing a graveside service for a person of conservative beliefs in my previous congregation who believed in bodily resurrection. His deceased mother had been placed in a beautiful pine wood coffin, which I blessed and said words of parting for the family.

Today a number of evangelical traditions still believe in the second coming, and in the bodily resurrection of the dead at such a time.

Rev. John Buehrens states that the ancient world believed that something was true if there were a number of witnesses. And so, the different versions of the stories in the canonical Bible of Jesus's resurrection were not questioned.

These stories gave credence to the Hebraic idea of bodily resurrection within a Hellenistic culture, and thus, helped solidify the new faith of Christianity.

What really happened? Looking back over hundreds of years, we cannot be sure.

Perhaps at least some of the disciples truly saw Jesus after his death.

In today's world occasionally we hear of a person who has felt or seen a loved one who has passed on.

There are stories across major religions of visitations from those who have Died and then come back to humans – yes rarely –but these stories persist across time and cultures.

Perhaps Jesus did appear to at least some of the disciples. We cannot rule this out.

We cannot prove it, either.

What is clear is that Jesus, a human being, died over two thousand years ago.

He was a healer, a mystic, a person who challenged the powers of his day – both political and religious – to make the world a place where there is less suffering, and in its place, kindness, peace and love.

What is clear is that Jesus's followers loved him so much that they went on teaching in his name.

What is clear is that from the death of Jesus arose the Christian religion, through which his spirit lives on.

If Jesus were here today I am sure he would be working to aid those who are destitute, and to end the huge gap between those who have and those who don't.

He would preach against the great harm to the climate and all of life created by human beings, whether through ignorance or greed.

He would advocate for the rights of those who are threatened -to lose their voices in society, to lose, for example their rights to vote - or to be threatened because of being different from others – whether because of one's race or culture or sexual orientation.

⁹ Paula Fredriksen. From Jesus to Christ. Second edition. Yale University Press, 2000, p. 138.

He would be opposed to violence in any form.

It's clear that his vision of the Kingdom of God has not arrived thousands of years later.

But his vision of how we might be as humans is always there, challenging us to move to become a world that would be fair, equitable, kind, and peaceful.

Rev. Patrick O'Neil, UU minister, describes for us some of the many meanings we can, as Unitarian Universalists, hold in our hearts on such a day like this, Easter morning.

I will close this sermon with Patrick's words:

*Easter is an impossible story written for everyone who has ever felt the sting of death
And wishes for something more.*

Easter is a story for anyone who loves life so much that they pray for more life to follow.

Easter is a story for people who can envision a loving divinity that will not be conquered by evil.

It's a story that never dies; of immovable objects that get tossed aside; of happy endings in a tragic world; of miracles; of faith rewarded and vision restored, and hope justified.

That's what Easter is.¹⁰

Peace and love to you.

Happy Easter. Happy Passover. Happy Ramedan!

¹⁰ Patrick O'Neill. Found in *Celebrating Easter and Spring: An Anthology of UU readings*, Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris, editors. Cambridge, MA: The Anne Miniver Press, 2000. P. 24