

The Certainty of Spring
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Ancient Witness: John 20:1-18

The great Sufi teacher, Mulla Nasrudin, was outside on his hands and knees below a lantern when a friend walked up. “What are you doing, Mulla?” his friend asked. “I’m looking for my key. I’ve lost it.” So his friend got down on his hands and knees too, and they both searched for a long time in the dirt beneath the lantern. Finding nothing, his friend finally turned to him and asked, “Where exactly did you lose it?” Nasrudin replied, “I lost it in the house, but there is more light out here.”

The search for enlightenment is not always an easy search. Sometimes we ask the wrong questions. Sometimes we ask others when we should ask ourselves. We look outside ourselves instead of within. Sometimes we search in places only where there is light. Or, in the dark times of our lives, we may give up searching altogether.

Winter is sometimes like that. After a while we may get really sick of it. The nights are so long and the days so short. It can be so drab, dreary, and dark that we might begin to wonder if the sun would ever come out again. We might become edgy, irritable, or depressed. This past COVID year has seemed like one long Winter for many of us.

But then, all of a sudden, it happens. The grass is green, flowers bloom, birds sing, the sun comes out, it’s warm and life starts again!

And in the story of the resurrection of Jesus, we see that there will always be a Spring, that even the darkest moments in human history do not have the last word. There will always be a Spring that even the coldest winter cannot stop from coming. Out of pain and suffering come possibilities of new life, meaning and purpose. We may not know how, when or why, but Spring is a certainty.

Resurrection is not just a First Century science fiction story. It is something that is woven into the fabric of reality.

As a spirit-person, Jesus’ life had a “raised up” quality. He was awake. Jesus was raised up long before Easter. He was resurrected before he died. And Jesus was saying, “You, too, can be awakened. You, too, can be raised up, resurrected.”

The New Testament talks about not just a single resurrection, but many resurrections. Paul wrote that God made us alive with Christ and raises us up with him. The same power that raised Jesus is able to raise all people. Resurrection is a mysterious process in the lives of each generation, something that we experience in the here and now, in this life, not at the end of it.

Easter is the reality of God springing forth, breaking through like a sprig of grass. Each day is an Easter, each moment, a resurrection. Easter is always happening, and what Easter Day does is help us become more aware of this.

I like what Dominic Crossan said: Easter happened “as soon as anyone saw God in Jesus.” As Christians we say that this person, Jesus, helps us see God, springing forth in the world. “Faith,” said Crossan, “did not start on Easter Sunday. It started among those first followers of Jesus in lower Galilee long before his death.”

Listen to this Hassidic folk tale:

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost, and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. “The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again,” they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read part of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

“No, I am sorry,” the rabbi explained. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well, what did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah was one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us here at the monastery? Which one? Do you suppose he meant Father Abbot. Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it,

even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Eldred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Eldred. But surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah. Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out for them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. Then another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

How are we to make sense of the miraculous resurrection of Jesus? I agree with Rabbi Harold Kushner when he said that God works miracles today by enabling ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He wrote:

Somewhere in the oncology ward of a hospital, a child is dying of leukemia. Her parents are at her side, praying for a miracle. But she dies, just as the doctors feared she would... Sometimes the miracle is not that the child survives. The miracle is that the parents' marriage survives, despite the awful strain that the death of a child places on marriage. The miracle is that the parents are prepared to go on affirming life and risking the vulnerability of loving each other, even after they have been so badly hurt by life. The miracle is that the faith of the community survives, that they are able to go on believing in the world and the value of prayer, even when they have learned that this is a world where innocent children die... weak people become strong, timid people become brave, selfish people become generous... people care for their elderly parents... or for wives in wheelchairs, for years, even decades... (Who Needs God?, p. 137)

How do they do it? Where do they get their strength? I can only say that the power that resurrects and raises up live that have become dead is the same power that raised Jesus in his followers' hearts. It comes from beyond us, yet it is at work within each of us.

Sometimes we have to experience great loss and defeat to discover this. Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom and be pushed to our human limits. Sometimes, in the process of our resurrection, we find life only after we have reached the point of death and desperation.

The resurrection does not mean that we are now immune from the evil of this world. It does not mean that society is progressing upward. It does not mean that things are getting better. It means that no matter how bleak, how bitter, how horrible things get, new life, new meaning, new purpose will sprout forth. Death is not the end. Spring is a certainty.

This is important to remember in a world where so many starve each day, where so many succumb to disease, where so many innocent ones perish in endless war and violent conflict.

In the 1980's thousands and thousands of citizens were killed by a brutal regime in Guatemala that receive direct support from the United States. Julia Esquivel was one of many who suffered torture at the hands of that government. She wrote this remarkable poem titled, "Certainty."

*"They can cut all the flowers
But Spring will always return."
Guatemala you will bloom.*

*Every drop of blood,
every tear,
every sob extinguished by bullets,
every cry of horror,
every shred of skin
torn away in hatred
by the anti-humans—
will bloom.*

*The sweat that broke out
of our anguish
fleeing from the police
and the sigh concealed
in the most secret of our fears—
will bloom.*

*We have lived a thousand years of death
in a Homeland
that will be altogether
"An eternal Spring."*

In Jesus, we see that the reality of God will not be denied. It will bloom. It will continue to spring forth in the lives of each generation. Resurrection gives us hope to participate in the struggle even when no end is in sight. It is knowing that "they can cut down all the flowers, but Spring will always return."