

After the Resurrection: An Easter Sermon

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Reading

Blessing for the Raising of the Dead

by Jan Richardson

This blessing
does not claim
to raise the dead.

It is not so audacious
as that.

But be sure
it can come
and find you
if you think yourself
beyond all hope,
beyond all remedy;
if you have
laid your bones down
in your exhaustion
and grief,
willing yourself numb.

This blessing
knows its way
through death,
knows the paths
that weave
through decay
and dust.

And while this blessing
does not have the power
to raise you,
it knows how
to reach you.

It will come to you,
sit down
beside you,
look you
in the eye
and ask

if you want
to live.

It has no illusions.
This blessing knows
it is an awful grace
to be returned
to this world.

Just ask Lazarus,
or the Shunammite's son.
Go to Nain
and ask the widow's boy
whether he had
to think twice
about leaving the quiet,
the stillness;
whether he hesitated
just for a moment
before abandoning the place
where nothing could harm
or disturb.

Ask the risen
if it gave them pause
to choose this life—
not as one thrust into it
like a babe,
unknowing, unasking,
but this time
with intent,
with desire.

Ask them how it feels
to claim this living,
this waking;
to welcome the breath
in your lungs,
the blood
in your veins;
to gladly consent
to hold in your chest
the beating heart
of this broken
and dazzling world.

Sermon:

Jesus spent three days in the tomb
And on Easter morning
When Mary, mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdelene
And another woman, who the gospels don't name
Went to the tomb where Jesus lay
To anoint his body and prepare him for burial
They found the stone that was blocking the entrance rolled away
And tomb empty.

And, distraught—can you imagine going to bury your loved one
And finding his body missing?
They look around
And two angels are sitting on the rock, instead
Saying “Do not be afraid”—
Angels seem to love to say that, don't they?
And the angels said to the women,
"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not
here; he has risen."

And then the women go to Jesus' disciples
And the others who are mourning his death
And they spread the good news
That Jesus has risen from the dead
That Jesus is still alive with them,
Walking among them
That they will see him again.

I love this story
Even though, I will be honest,
I do not believe it is true.

Well, at least not literally
But I believe there is truth in the story, still,
Because as a Unitarian Universalist,
I believe that Jesus was a great preacher
A prophet, a teacher, a shining example of the best that humanity has to offer
A child of God—and aren't we all children of God?
But I also believe that Jesus was fully human
A human embodying God's divine love
Which I believe is an incredibly powerful message
Because it shows that all of us, children of God
Can strive to embody God's divine love in the world.

And I love this story because it speaks to a profound yearning I,
and I know many of you, feel
For death not to be the end
For death not to be so *final*,

So *ultimate*,
For there to be some way to get back what has been lost,
To not have to say goodbye.

In the 15 months since my father died
I know I have felt this many times
This “how could this be real”,
the magical thinking that can come with grief,
This “maybe this is temporary”
This “somehow this can be undone”
That he will somehow be at this afternoon’s family Easter gathering
Before my mind catches itself.

My sister theorizes that this is because, for most of us,
If we are lucky,
Our parents existence have been as much a statement of fact
As the idea that the sun will rise
That the morning will come
That our parents will always be there.
And losing a parent
Is a terribly disorienting thing
It is no wonder my mind plays these tricks on me.

And so when I hear the Easter story
Jesus’ disciples, his mother, Mary Magdelene
Weeping at the foot of the cross
I can almost feel their desperation
Their “can;t-it-be-undone” longing
I can almost feel their shifting into auto-pilot
Beginning to prepare the body
As shock takes over
And people bring them meals that they don’t want to eat.

And I can feel their surprise, their fear, their worry, their outrage
When they realize that the tomb is empty.
And then their utter disbelief, mixed with joy and relief
When the angel tells them
“He is not dead. He is risen!”
I will admit, this is the kind of miracle, this raising of the dead,
The this-didn’t-happen
That I have longed for deep in my bones for these last 15 months.

And yet.
We cannot raise the dead.
The dead do not come back to join the living.

And for those who have known loss
Which is all of us

Known death
Known dreams that have died
We know that there is a moment
When those who have lost something must face a choice
To come back to the land of the living
To choose to live in this world
As fully as we can
After the death.

Author Jan Richardson writes,
“Ask them how it feels
to claim this living,
this waking;
to welcome the breath
in your lungs,
the blood
in your veins;
to gladly consent
to hold in your chest
the beating heart
of this broken
and dazzling world.”

The beauty and the pain of living
And living fully
after a loss
does not cease to amaze me.

The summer I turned 21
I lost one of my best friends in a tragic car accident.

And two weeks later, I found myself at the Unitarian Universalist summer camp
That I worked at for over a decade.
And this camp is amazing—
Fun, zany, very focused on the emotional experience of campers
On building community
And the staff people love to come up with bizarre and creative activities to do with the
campers.
So 14 days after Katie died,
When the world as I knew it seemed to have ended
When I didn't know how to make sense of this grief, this terrible tragedy
Gabe, an eccentric, warm, welcoming staff person
Said “listen up everyone. Here's my idea for an activity.

Ninjas. Versus Florists.”

Everyone looked at him uncertainly.

“No no, hold on!” he said. “let me explain.
The Ninjas have a *very sacred recipe* for turtle soup,
And the florists have stolen it. And in retaliation,
The ninjas have stolen all of the florists’ flowers,
And they have to retrieve them.

So basically, all of the kids will dress up,
And we’ll create a campus wide scavenger hunt
Where each team has to find their lost item,
And the one that finds it first wins
Except we’ll give points in such a way that of course no one wins
Because we are a hippie camp and everyone wins!”

Gabe ran out of steam.
Silence descended over the room as we digested Gabe’s passion about this incredibly
ridiculous idea, Ninjas versus Florists.

And after the terrible thing I had been through,
I realized in that moment,
That this could be the most trivial, inconsequential, inane thing I had ever heard
And I could scoff at this
“How could these people think this mattered, given all the tragedies that happen in this
world?”
Or I could choose to claim this living
To welcome the breath into my lungs
To hold the beating heart in my chest
And I threw my head back with the rest of the group
And I laughed until it hurt, for the first time in two weeks.

Surely, this is resurrection.

This is our Easter message:
The dead do not come back to us.
And too often,
Dreams and people and relationships and hopes die.
And sometimes,
Though not often enough,
amidst tragedy,
Amidst loss,
Something beautiful rises.

My housemate, Matt, who preached here in early April
Lost his dad in mid march
And I was talking to his mom
She was staying with us last week
And the subject invariably turned to Rich’s death,
And we were talking about all of the *work* that death takes
And she said

“you know, I just wanted to clean his clothes out quickly.
I know I don’t have to rush,
But I just felt compelled to sort through his clothes.
I gave all of his clothes, all of them,
To a shelter that supports people experiencing homelessness.
And now I just imagine pieces of him,” she said, smiling fondly,
“Walking all over Chicago, his socks on other people’s feet, his suits going to interviews,
helping people get jobs.
I like imagining him that way
That’s how he was, always connecting with people, always helping people.”

Surely, this is resurrection.

And this resurrection is slow, painful, arduous work.
For the bruised and broken, healing and hoping people
Which is all of us.

Resurrections are not painless
It is a fearful and courageous thing to love what death can touch
To open our hearts to love when we have known loss
Knowing that it is this very love
This very capacity for connection
That makes being human so dazzlingly beautiful
And so excruciatingly painful.

Jan Richardson writes:

“The mystery in all this is that when our hearts break,
they can become bigger.
If we can stay with the sorrow and, more important,
if we can stay with the love that goes deeper even than the sorrow,
that is more fierce than our fiercest grief,
our hearts become more open than we ever imagined they could.”

Surely, this is resurrection.

Less than six months after my own dad died
I moved in to a new house with my partner Ian
And our five housemates.
And every once in a while
I think “my Dad would have loved this house”.
With its crown moldings and quirky angles
and epic potential for more projects.
My dad, an engineer, a hobby woodworker,
Who made gorgeous hand-made furniture
Who always did his own home repairs
Who built the deck at my childhood home,
Who taught my sister and I about using power tools, and included us in the home repair
projects,

In his own quiet act of feminism

And every time I paint another room
Or lay and grout tiles
Or use the chop saw to build a shelf
I think of the gifts he has left me
His gifts which I carry inside of me.
I figured out why I was so comforted, this fall
Doing so many projects around my new house
In using his gifts, and feeling connected to him.
And though it is insufficient, and always will be
I think:
“Surely, this is a kind of resurrection”

So friends,
For all these resurrections,
And for those stories of resurrection
Which each of you carry,
Let us rise,
And let us welcome resurrection into our life
For these are only resurrections because we have known pain, and loss
So let us say together
At once a hopeful and a broken
Hallelujah.

Amen.