

## *¡Presente!*

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Easter

**Ancient Witness:** Matthew 28:1-10

There's a story about a rabbi who was always teaching his followers to seek the answers in themselves. But the followers always came back expecting more answers from him.

Finally he set up a booth with a sign: "Any Two Questions Answered for \$100."

After some deliberation, one of his richest followers decided to ask and brought important questions. He paid the money and said as he did, "Isn't \$100 rather costly for just two questions?" "Yes," said the rabbi, "and what is your second question?"

The search for enlightenment is never easy. Sometimes we ask the wrong questions. Sometimes we look outside ourselves instead of looking within. Lacking patience, we might give up altogether. I hope that you haven't given up.

How does a modern-day person even talk about resurrection? How does one celebrate Easter if one doesn't think that Jesus literally and physically raised from the grave and walked around? What about many of us spiritual liberal people? What about all those spiritual people who have problems with religion?

The great liberal theologian, Paul Tillich, said that Jesus was resurrected in the hearts and minds of his followers. That's how he thought of it, that Jesus was raised up within his followers when his

message did not die. Jesus, the spiritual teacher and social prophet, was reconstituted among them. Well, does this mean they just made up this event? Well, that's not the point. The point is that from the midst of his followers, hope emerged from despair and light emerged from darkness, when forces of greed and domination seem to be so strong. And they were trying to express that.

Former Catholic priest and New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, said "the point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically, and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."

A few years ago I went with a delegation from my previous church to the border of the United States and Mexico, one day we walked along a portion of the migrant trail where we would pause at these markers where the bodies of people were found. They perished in the brutal heat as they tried to make their way here. It has been U.S. policy to use the desert as a deterrent, funneling desperate migrants through the Sonoran desert, resulting in deaths of 10,000 people over the past 25 years. Their crime was simply trying to escape violence and crushing poverty.

Some of the markers had the name of the person. We would take moment for prayer, perhaps a poem, and after saying the person's name, we would say in unison, "¡Presente!" ¡Presente! literally means "here" or "present" in Spanish. There is a long tradition in Latin American movements for justice of invoking the memory of those who lost their lives in the struggle. It is a way of saying, "you are here with us, you are not forgotten, and we continue the struggle in your name."

The photo on the cover of your bulletin is a painting of Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez that we saw in Nogales, Mexico. He was gunned down by U.S. Border Patrol from the other side. And he became a symbol of the brutality of the border, and our immigration policy, and the innocent victims left in its wake.

The painting is on the wall of a building where he was shot and killed. Jose and his friends were throwing stones at the wall, and the border patrol agents claimed that they were afraid for their lives. And having stood at that very spot where we took that photo, it is obvious that this was simply a cold-blooded, unjustified murder and an exertion of power and dominance. As you can see under his name is the word, "Presente."

Today, we say the name, Jesus of Nazareth, and we say, "Presente!" The spirit of Jesus is still alive among us, and his movement did not die.

His movement to transform the world into the heavenly kingdom is still alive. His movement of nonviolent resistance to injustice is still alive. His movement where the last are first, of solidarity with the outcasts and nobodies, the poor, the refugees, the vulnerable, is still alive. His movement of compassion and radical equality, that threatens tyrants, the wealthy and the powerful is still alive!

Jesus is here. He is not forgotten. And we continue the struggle in his name.

New Testament scholar, Walter Wink said, "Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed head by blowing on it." The teaching, the movement, the power could not be killed.

Now, if there's anything we can say about Jesus, I think that it's that he had this profound awareness of God. And it was this awareness that led him to challenge injustice, to live with compassion toward others, to be filled with inner calm and happiness.

His life had a “raised up” quality. He was awake. He was truly alive. One can say that Jesus was raised up *long before* Easter. He was resurrected *before* he died. And what Jesus was about was this: He said, you, too, can be awakened. You, too, can be raised up, resurrected, alive. The reign of God is right under your nose, he said, and you can live in it. You, too, can know true happiness, peace and freedom.

Many people don’t realize this, but the New Testament talks not just about one, single resurrection, but many resurrections. Paul talked about how all the followers of Jesus are resurrected and “raised with Christ.” Paul talked about the followers as those who were dead and have been awakened to life, awakened by the presence of God within them.

The truth is, Easter isn’t just about Jesus. It’s about the Sacred Presence hidden within him and within *all* people.

The same power that raised Jesus before he died—giving him new life, freedom and joy—is able to raise all people. And so in this sense we are raised with Jesus. In our text today, the spirit of Jesus says, “You will see me,” and in the last verse in Matthew, he says, “Remember, I *am with you* always, to the end of the age.” In other words, when we experience the same life-giving presence of God as Jesus did, the same passion for justice and love, his spirit is with us.

Roger Wolsley, a progressive minister and colleague said, “Jesus returns every time... we forgive ourselves and others, act with compassion, feed the hungry, protect the oppressed, speak truth to power.”

And so, resurrection, it seems to me, is a mysterious, ever-unfolding process in the lives of each generation. It is something we *experience* in the *here* and *now*.

One Easter morning there was a young mother who had lost her son, Barry, just six month before to cancer. Only the presence of her husband and small daughter kept her in the pew, enduring the Hallelujahs.

Later, someone from the hospital handed her a painting. “It’s Barry’s,” she said.

The picture showed a lake with people on opposite shores. Three waved from one side; on the other shore, above the head of a small boy in a red baseball cap, a cartoon balloon shouted, “Hi Mom, Dad, Betsy!”

And then she understood.

Like a message from the past, like a promise from the past, the Bringer of wholeness and wisdom comes to us. “You will see me. I am with you always.”

In a speech I once heard Marian Wright Edelman, who was President of the Children’s Defense Fund, tell a story. Jean Thomson was a good teacher. But when she met one of the boys in her new fifth grade class, Teddy Stollard, she didn’t like him. She knew better—not to prematurely judge a child. But when she saw his unkempt appearance and uncaring attitude, she couldn’t help but think that he was going to be a lot of trouble and that it was going to be a long year.

She looked back on Teddy's school record. In the first grade it said, "Poor home situation. Low achievement. Can do better." In the second grade it said, "Mother seriously ill. Can do better." In the third grade: "Mother died. Can do better." In the fourth grade: "He is too serious. Slow learner. Doesn't apply himself. Can do better."

And so here he was in the fifth grade with this attitude problem and lack of effort. Later that year came the class Christmas party, and all the children brought gifts for their teacher, each of them nicely wrapped. Except for Teddy. He came forward and gave his teacher, Jean Thompson, a wrinkled brown paper bag. All the children laughed when they saw it. In the bag were a bracelet and a bottle of half-used perfume.

Afterwards he said to her, "Now you smell like my mother. That is *her bracelet* that I gave you..."

And she was changed! Their relationship and their lives were transformed in that moment.

Years later she received a letter from Teddy saying that he was graduating from high school, with honors, and that he owed her his thanks for helping to turn around. "I couldn't have done it without you," he said.

Years later she received another letter from Teddy saying that he was graduating at the head of his class from the university.

Still many years after that she received another letter. "I am now Dr. Theodore Stollard. I now have my M.D. and will be married in the fall. My father has died, and *I want you to come sit where my mother would have sat.*

"You will see me. I am with you always."

And you know, in a way, the Great Teacher and Leader *is* with us—in moments of grace and beauty and love, inspiring us to keep his movement and his vision alive. And the same Divine Wisdom that awakened him can awaken and restore our spirits.

Jesus is here! Presente! Presente!