

On Life After Death

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I want this morning to kindle your hope in eternal life, in life after death, in what we call “heaven”. Paul said to the Thessalonians:

We want you to be quite certain, brothers and sisters, about those who have died so that you do not grieve about them as people who have no hope. For we believe that Christ died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus. God will bring them with him. (I Thessalonians 4:13-14)

We all have our questions. Is there a heaven? What will it be like? Who will be there? A woman in my congregation a few years back asked to talk with me about her father. He, facing his own impending death by disease, decided to take his own life. He had suffered many traumas. Growing up in Eastern Europe, he had been imprisoned by the Nazis. Now he was suddenly gone from her life. Marianne asked me: “Where did he go? Where is he now?”

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann asked the questions this way:

Is death the end of everything?

Where are the dead?

What is their future?

Where are we going?

What do we expect?

Are we expected?

Is there something or someone expecting us?¹

A few years ago I visited a dying man in the hospital. He did not know me. Friends who loved him had sent me to his bedside. I was probably the only minister he would see. He was a gay man with no church. He told me that he would be greatly relieved if death was the end of it all. What he had learned in church and experienced in church had extinguished his hope in eternal life. I could have wept.

I said to him that I believed the eternal arms of God were the arms of a greater love than we could imagine, that they were around him even now and that they would welcome him into the world to come. I prayed with him, for him, that he might experience God's arms now. He thanked me politely for coming, and I left. He died a few days later.

This week I told my 92 year old mother that I was preaching on heaven this Sunday. Her eyes lit up, and she said, “Good!” I asked her what she thought heaven would be like. She got tears in her eyes and said with a broken voice: “All I know is that it will be good.” I said, “That’s all you need to know.” She echoed our conversation: “All I know is that it will be good. And that’s all I need to know.”

Sometimes our ideas about heaven can dampen our hope. The thought of eternity as unending time, for example, can dismay us. And who wants to go to a place with streets of gold and everybody playing harps? Mark Twain quipped that if harp playing were all that fun, more people would be playing them now. George MacDonald, the great Scottish writer who influenced C.S. Lewis, said that if our idea of God makes us sad, we need a new idea of God. The same applies to our ideas about heaven. The world to come will exceed our most wonderful ideas about it. As Paul said,

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him. (I Corinthians 2:9)

How might we begin to imagine it? Well, there are certain things we need to *un-imagine*. Heaven is not a gated community with people exactly like us. Many years ago I read a sermon by famous fundamentalist preacher, Bob Jones, Sr., who founded Bob Jones University. The sermon was entitled, “There Is A Hell.”

He argued that there must be a hell because his sainted mother would not be happy in heaven if she had to spend eternity with thugs, thieves and other sinners. This puzzled me since those were exactly the types Jesus spent a lot of time with.

Revelation 7 says that heaven will be populated with every race, tribe and tongue, and that their number will be beyond our counting.

Theologian Christopher Morse says that when Christians think about heaven they get hung up on *chronology*, *geography*, and *census*. Chronology: when will the End come? Geography: where is it and what will it look like? And census: who will be in and who will be out. Such literal-mindedness does not serve us well. All we know from scripture is that it will be good beyond our imagining.

Julian of Norwich was a medieval mystic who lived her life in a little room built on the side of a church. She was given visions by God; she called them "Showings". In one she received this vision of the world to come: "All shall be well and all shall be well. All manner of thing shall be well." Could our hope be much more wonderful than that?

John Donne the famous poet and preacher at St. Paul's cathedral in London grew ill and pondered his own death and the life to come. Here is his vision:

All humanity is on one Author and is one volume...When one person dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book but translated into a better language... God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. ²

Translated into a better language: what a beautiful image of the life to come.

The way Paul put it in I Corinthians 15 is: "We shall all be changed!" Sue told me that when her babies woke her up at night to have their diapers changed she thought of that verse from Paul: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed!" That verse should be printed on the every church nursery!

Changed how? *Healed:* body, mind and spirit. And *Forgiven*, fully so. And *Completed*. L. D. Johnson the long time chaplain at Furman University lost his daughter in a car accident. She, a teacher in her twenties, was traveling home for Christmas. He wrote that he was able to take comfort in thought: "What we are *becoming* in this life we *are* in heaven." Heaven as life's completion.

III

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope in eternal life. As Christ was raised, so shall we. And his encounters with his disciples as Risen Lord give us hints of the world to come. There was *recognition*. Our personhood will survive

our deaths. And *mercy*, the mercy he gave them all. What we look forward to is the Triumph of Mercy.

In today's text Jesus was addressing his bewildered and grief-stricken disciples. What will become of Jesus? What will become of them? What will become of their relationship with him? Jesus said,

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you into myself, that where I am you will be also. (John 14:1-3)

“And you know the way”, he concluded.

Thomas spoke up, “Lord we do not know where we are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas was here the *faithful agnostic*, as we all are some days. He trusted in God, in Jesus, but there was a lot he did not know. Jesus replied, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick told the story of the traveler in Switzerland who lost his way. He saw a small boy and asked him where Kandersteg was. The boy replied, “Sir, I do not know where Kandersteg is but *there* is the road to it.”³

I do not know much about heaven, but *Christ* is the road to it.

Are there other roads? Who can know? But we should never underestimate the reach and depth of God's love. But be assured of this: his is the only road you need.

"In my Father's house are many rooms," Jesus said, many, not one. And many *flocks* too. Jesus said,

I am the good shepherd... and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also. (John 10:14-16)

Have you ever worried that you were in the wrong flock? Have no fear. He will bring you too.

"The Eternal God is our dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." And no one, Jesus said later, will snatch you out of God's hands. (John 10:27-30)

IV

Frederick Buechner, a novelist, preacher and spiritual writer, is one of my favorite writers. One day out of the blue his 80 year old mother asked him, "Do really believe anything *happens* after you die?" He was shocked because she never talked about religion or death. Buechner sputtered out loudly because she

did not hear very well: “Yes, I Believe Something Happens”, but he knew he wanted to say more. So he wrote her a letter. Here is how he described the letter:

I told her I believe that what happens when you die is that, in ways I know no more about than she did, you are given your life back again, and I said there are three reasons why I believed it. First, I wrote her, I believed it because if I were God and loved the people I created and wanted them to become at last the best they had it in them to be, I couldn't imagine consigning them to oblivion when their time came with the job under the best of circumstances only a fraction done. Second, I said, I believed it apart from any religious considerations, because I had a hunch it was true. I intuited it. I said that if the victims and victimizers, the wise and the foolish, the good-hearted and heartless, all end up alike in the grave and that is the end of it, then life would be like a black comedy, and even to me, even at its worst, life doesn't feel like a black comedy. It feels like a mystery. It feels as though, at the innermost heart of it, there is Holiness... And lastly, I wrote her, I believe that what happens to us after we die is that we aren't dead forever because Jesus said so.

Buechner goes on.

Jesus was another of the dead people I knew my mother wouldn't want to talk about, and I had no idea how she would react to my invoking his authority. But when he said to the Good Thief on the cross next to his, "Today shalt Thou be with me in Paradise", I wrote to her, I would bet my bottom dollar that he of all people knew what he was talking about, because if in one way he was a human being, in another way he was immeasurably more.⁴

Some weeks later he asked her about the letter, and she said it made her cry.

What are the tears, the longing, the lump in the throat when we think about such things but a longing for home, not so much the one behind us as the one ahead of us, reunion with God and those we love, for as Paul says, love never ends. It will be the Great Homecoming and the Final Healing.

When it gets down to basics, spiritually speaking, Ram Dass says, "We're all just walking each other home."

1. From a lecture "Is There Life after Death?" delivered at Wake Forest Divinity School, Spring 2002

2. John Donne, *Upon Emergent Conditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) Meditation XVII, p. 86
3. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Assurance of Immortality* (N.Y.: The MacMillian Co., 1923) p. 109
4. Frederick Buechner, "*The Eyes of The Heart*" (Harper San Francisco, 1999), pp 15-16