

### **“Is There Life After Death?”**

Revelation 7:9-17, John 11:38-44, I John 11:38-44

“The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth,  
and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them,  
‘Unbind him, and let him go.’” John 11:44

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams  
Morningside Presbyterian Church  
Atlanta, Georgia  
March 13, 2005

Life and death have been much on our minds in the past 48 hours. The deep- down soul of our city has been rocked by the murders of four citizens of our community, all of whom had dedicated their lives to public service and to protecting and preserving the common good in one way or another. We grieve this Sunday morning with the families whose loved ones have been lost to death so suddenly, so senselessly, so unexpectedly. At times like these, we hold on to the words of the Psalmist for the sake of all the precious lives that have been snuffed out.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear  
no evil for thou art with me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence  
of mine enemies. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The court reporter who was renowned for her casserole and cookies,  
the earnest, young deputy sheriff,  
the dedicated customs agent, remodeling his home,  
the highly- regarded, fair- minded judge:  
I am convinced by faith that they dwell in the house of the Lord forever now.

Sometimes the brutality of the world, the destructiveness of rage, and the tenuousness of human existence converge in such a way that our faith in a just and loving God begins to shake. And at such a time, there is nothing to do but to hold fast to the promises we know by faith- that the Lord of hosts is with us, that the God of Jacob is our refuge, and that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can ever finally separate us from the love of God. These are the convictions to which we hold fast. And after we have held fast and through the grace of God, have somehow begun to heal, we will go on because we have no choice, but we will go on, I hope and pray, wiser and stronger and more committed to creating a community of justice and mercy than ever before.

Today, I want to think with you about these whom Atlanta has lost to death in recent days and, about those you and I have loved and lost across the years. I want to think with you about what might happen to you and to me when our days on earth are done. What should we look forward to when we come to an end? As the Psalmist reminds us, for ever living mortal, our days are as grass. Sooner or later, we come to the end.

Christian theology has sometimes been accused of answering questions that no one is asking, but I am confident that today's question, "What will become of me when I die?" is one that will pass through all our minds at one time or another.

I remember a short story the famous writer John O'Hara wrote that involved a master who sent his servant to the marketplace. (Ironically, the setting of the story is the ancient city of Baghdad, place today where death is a brutal fact of life for American soldiers, and Iraqi citizens. I learned just this morning that two American civilians in Baghdad to help with the rebuilding efforts were ambushed and killed yesterday). The servant returns from the marketplace pale and stricken. He says, "Master, while I was at the market, I was jostled by someone. When I turned to look at him, I saw the face of Death. Death stared at me and made a threatening gesture in my direction. Please, may I borrow your horse so that I can ride away to the distant city of Samara, so I might escape death?" The master lent the servant his horse, and the servant galloped away frantically off into the night. The next day, the master himself went to the marketplace in Baghdad. He, too, encountered Death among the crowds there.

"Why did you make such a threatening gesture toward my servant yesterday?" the master asked.

Death answered, "There was no threatening gesture but simply an expression of surprise. You see, I was surprised to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him in Samara tonight."

It is not humanly impossible to avoid what poet Alan Seeger calls "our rendezvous with Death." I remember the words of an expert on the Soviet Union. Before the Soviet Union collapsed, he said, "I predict the downfall of the Soviet Union sooner rather than later because it is based on a philosophy of life that will never endure. Communism has no answer to death." Faith answers death, and most people live by some kind of faith.

What does the Christian faith have to say in response to life's most critical question?

I address this topic with some trepidation. We must be wary of doing what Reinhold Niebuhr warned against, that is describing "the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell." I won't do that, but I want to say that the Christian faith, at its core, is a resurrection faith. It is based on the central conviction that Jesus Christ, though he was crucified, dead, and buried, by the power of God was raised from the dead, thereby finally and ultimately defeating death.

The New Testament offers maddeningly few details about life after death. The longest conversation on the topic occurs in John's gospel where Jesus is facing his own death. He reassures his disciples that in his Father's house will be many mansions. "I go there to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, then I will come again and take you unto myself, where I am there you may be also." (John 14) The Greek word for that unforgettable phrase "many mansions" means literally "abiding places." In my Father's house there are many abiding places, which suggest to me that heaven is not so much a place in terms of the spatial sense but rather a state of being. Heaven is the Bible way of naming the reality of

abiding with God forever. By inference then, hell would be that state of being that is far away from God, a condition quite possible to attain here on earth, by the way.

The longest sustained narrative in John's gospel is in the eleventh chapter, a portion of which we read today, when Jesus raises Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead. (John 11) The writer wants to understand that this man was really dead. For four days he had been dead. The stench had already coming out of the tomb and yet Jesus stood at the mouth of the tomb, and said, "Lazarus, come out." Out he walks, with his hands and face still bound in burial cloth. This miracle epitomizes who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus is the one who gives life.

This is great news for all of us even now. In the midst of earthly life, there is the possibility that our name will be on Jesus' lips, "Come out of that dark, dead place where you are. Eternal life as we understand it in the Christian faith is accessible now on this earth. (See Gail O'Day, *The Word Disclosed*) Today's question, though, is whether this life ends with the grave. John's gospel ends with an account of the appearance of the risen Christ before his disciples. In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, there is a very interesting scene in which the disciples are locked in a room out of fear. The door is locked, and yet Jesus appears in their midst. He says to them "Peace be with you." What did he look like? We are not told, but we are told that they could recognize him. He could pass through the door without its being unlocked. Had he become spirit? Yet, whatever form he was in, there was continuity between the earthly being that he was and the being that he had become. He held out his hands to Thomas and said, "Thomas, put your finger here."

He was there for them, risen, offering peace- that much we know. We can only trust that he will be there for us at the end and that we will know him and that he will know us and that we will know one another, perhaps not as we are but transformed. I love that thought, that I, in my eternal existence, might put aside all the things that have separated me from other people- my anger, my prejudices, all those things would be transformed through the power of the living God. Those who have known me and loved me will still be able to know me and love me, but they and I will be whole. Wounded yes, but whole again. Now there is something to hope for.

The question is not so much what will heaven be like. The question is who will be waiting for us when we cross to the other side. The question is also is whether or not we are going to assume that Christianity is only about eternity and forget Jesus' words as the risen Christ to his disciples who told them to feed his lambs. "What are you doing standing here looking up to heaven?" he said. "You have work to do."

Some of you may have heard me say before that my grandfather was a preacher. One night he was preaching in Waycross, Georgia on I Corinthians 15, a very strong statement by Paul on the resurrection and eternal life. In the midst of that sermon, he collapsed in the pulpit. He had had a cerebral hemorrhage. He never recovered consciousness and All my life, my favorite Bible verse has been the last verse of the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of I Corinthians. After all eloquent reflection on resurrection and immortality, Paul ends this way:

*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, immovable, always  
excelling in the work of the Lord, for you know that your labors are  
not in vain.*

This is not another worldly faith that we have, sisters and brothers. This is faith in Christ who was and is and is to come.

Believe it if you will. Believe it or not. I can't imagine through why we would want to believe that life ends with the grave. I can't believe why we would think that at the end there will be only ash and memory. I can't imagine why the God who made this earthly life so beautiful and meaningful and full of joy would decide that this life was all there would be. If God could be so gracious to us with this earthly life, then surely, there is more to come.

I close with something that Henri Nouwen wrote, based on a little verse from I John, "See what love the Father has given us for us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are." (I John 3:1) Nouwen created this imaginary conversation which takes place between a set of twins, a sister and a brother, not yet born, still living in their mother's womb.

The sister says, "You know, brother, I think there is going to be life after birth."

The brother says, "Why, I think that is the most ridiculous idea I have ever heard."

The girl says, "I really believe there must be something else-a place with light and freedom to move. You are not going to believe this, brother, but I'll tell you what else I believe. I believe there is a mother.

You have never seen a mother and neither have I," the brother answers. "This is all we've got."

"But don't we feel squeezes and intimations of something else now and again? I think those are there to get us ready for another place. A place more beautiful than this. A place where we will see our mother face-to-face."

*(Our Greatest Gift: Meditations on Death and Dying)*

Now we know in part, but there will be a day when we will know everything, just as we have been fully known. (I Corinthians 13)

The communion of the saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. I can think of a lot worse things to believe in than these.

Glory be to God. Amen.