

AFTER DYING, WHAT'S NEXT?
Easter Sunday, March 26, 1989

7:30 A.M.
John 11: 25-27

Mark Dunn
John 20: 11-18

The gifted Christian musician Joseph Webster was often tormented by deep feelings of depression. On one occasion when he was experiencing more despair than usual, he was visited by his friend Fillmore Bennett.

Discovering his friends despondency, Bennett encouraged Webster to direct his thoughts in a heavenly direction. Bennett wrote some poetic verses and when Webster read them a new look of hope came into his eyes. After putting in some musical notes, Webster picked up his violin and began to play a melody he had composed for the words. Within half an hour, the enduring hymn, "In the Sweet By-and-By" was born. A hymn that gives hope for life eternal. I won't quote from the hymn now but will save the best for last.

On this day, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, it is most fitting that we talk about heaven. After all, Jesus died on Friday and was resurrected on Sunday. His experience was more than one of those "out of the body" experiences. He was in the tomb for three days and that's different. So, for a few minutes I want to reflect on this neglected subject call heaven.

The way I will proceed through the reflection is to first deal with what I see as a condition of modernity and, second, present evidence for immortality.

I. THE CONDITION OF MODERNITY

When someone asks what we believe about the resurrection of Christ, we can say many things. We can say, like Paul, that "God through Christ was reconciling the world unto Himself." Or, through the Jesus' death and resurrection, God extends His grace to us to release us from condemnation.

Since it is part of our psyche to assume that everything must be paid for, God through Christ paid for our stumblings that we might be free. But, there is another meaning to Jesus' death and resurrection. Through His glorious resurrection He stormed the citadel of death and opened the gates of eternal life. He turned the sunset of life into a sunrise, death into life, and sorrow into joy. Jesus told us in the 14th chapter of John, "I go to prepare a place for you." Maybe you have heard these truths before but they just kind of slipped over the head as clichés or slogans. There may be a reason why we drift off to sleep at the sound of this theological language.

To proclaim that Jesus conquered death and that we have a home in heaven is a little embarrassing to the modern mind. We are rational human beings. Through logic we can lift up what is true and what is false. To the rational mind the resurrection might be a myth. Through our reasoning power, we can give physical reasons for such phenomenon. We believe in only what we can see.

We are embarrassed by this "Glory Land " language because that seems contrary to the beliefs of the scientific age. Science and technology have become our salvation. Science has given us computers, machines and conveniences to make life easier. Medical science has been able to help us live longer healthier lives. I personally celebrate that.

Technology brings electricity to homes and water to the washing machine. I believe in washing machines. I have one in the basement. We are comfortable talking about remodeling our home but uncomfortable conversing about our belief in a home in heaven. We can see, feel and touch them.

To be perfectly honest, I was uncomfortable reflecting on such a subject. How many times have you heard me preach life eternal? Except for funerals, I can't remember ever discussing this theme. Previously, when I did a memorial service for a person outside the church, I tried to obtain a feel for what they believed in, so that I wouldn't embarrass myself or the family. I am still sensitive to the family's needs but also want to be faithful to the gospel of God's love.

Part of the gospel is centered around the fact that Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has conquered death for us. Now, I always read Jesus' words to Martha at the death of her brother Lazarus.

I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. (John 11:25-6)

Maybe Jesus' question to Martha is also a question for the modern mind: "Do you believe this?"

A second problem with modernity is the amount of interest in the here and now. Christopher Lasch refers to our age as the "Culture of Narcissism." He said there is a panic in our age. We take no interest in the future and do nothing to provide ourselves with the traditional consolations of old age, the most important of which is the belief that future generations will in some sense carry on our life's work. There is a sense in which the only thing which is important is the now. How much fun can I have now. You can see this in bumper stickers. Have you seen the one that says, "We are spending our children's inheritance." Implication is in the now and not the consequences of these parents' actions.

Sounds like I had an axe to grind. But I think there is some truth to the fact that we only mention heaven at funerals, because we are embarrassed that our interest is with the here and now and not the future. The end result can only be despair. In our panic living we are running away from that despair.

II. EVIDENCE FOR LIFE ETERNAL

This morning I realize I am speaking to people with rational minds. Like myself, you have your doubts, and like myself, we would like to see some evidence of life eternal. The folks from Missouri are not the only ones who respond with "show me." Our scientific minds need a little scientific evidence. So, I'll attempt to use science to show you.

The first evidence for life beyond this one is found in the "near-death experiences." Morton Kelsey talks about this in his book *"Afterlife"*, which I very much recommend for your reading. According to Kelsey, there have been people who have been so near death or who have died that they feel themselves lifted from their bodies. They hear medical personnel pronounce them dead. Many report experiencing a strong sense of peace. If they were experiencing pain, that pain disappears. Some report hearing beautiful music as they are cut off from direct awareness of their bodies. Even Plato in the *"Republic"* tells of a soldier named Er, who dies in battle, meets others in the after-life, and wakes up on the funeral pyre.

Dr. Raymond Moody, a philosopher, medical doctor and psychiatrist, in his book *"Life After Life"* reported that many people who had near-death experiences saw a beautiful light. One of his case studies describes it like this:

I floated....up into this pure crystal clear light, an illuminating white light. It was beautiful and so bright, so radiant, but it didn't hurt my eyes.

It's ironic that the Quakers speak of their experiencing God as an experience of the inner light. Recently, there was a movie entitled *"Go Toward The Light"*. It was the story of parents who had a child who was dying. When hope for a cure was lost, the mother very bravely instructed her child to "go toward the light."

I haven't had this kind of near-death experience but I visited with a man who did. During my chaplaincy training in a hospital, I was paged to come immediately to CCU. The nursing supervisor was concerned about the patient because he didn't want to live. They had to shock him back to life several times. He had a near death experience in which he said he experienced such a sense of peace that he couldn't describe. The nurse was concerned because he had a lot to live for; a lovely wife, grandchildren and his health was good except they had to find the right medication for an irregular heart rate. The staff wanted me to persuade him to fight to live. As I talked with this sweet man, I found I couldn't do that. Despite heroic measures, he died a few weeks later. I knew he was truly at peace.

Second, evidence for eternal life is found in nature. A lava wraps itself in a cocoon which looks like a miniature casket. You think existence is over for the little worm. But, after a period of time, a beautiful moth emerges. What was once a worm now experiences existence in a new way. He has a new body and can fly like a bird.

Psychologists have theorized that birth is very traumatic for a baby. Just think that with birth contractions, the baby must feel that something traumatic is about to happen. Soon they will be leaving this place of food, shelter and comfort. During funerals I sometime ask the congregation to imagine that a set of twins about to be born talk to each other. They would probably be saying goodbye to each other in the end. But, we know that is the beginning of new life for them. When we pass beyond the veil, could there be new life for us?

CONCLUSION

Evidence for life eternal not only comes from near-death experiences, from nature, but more importantly from God's promises through the Christ. "I will never leave you or forsake you." "I go to prepare a place for you." "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." Another that I didn't mention is when Jesus stood at the tomb of his friend Lazarus and wept. He cried just before He raised him from the dead. Some scholars say he cried because of what he was doing to Lazarus. He was bringing him back from a place of peace.

We started our investigation with a musician who was in great despair. But after helping to write the music and then playing the melody to those poetic words, he was resurrected from his despair. After looking at the evidence for life eternal, it's ironic what the words say."

There's a land that is fairer than day, and by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way, to prepare us a dwelling place there.
We shall sing on that beautiful shore the melodious songs of the blest,
And our spirits shall sorrow no more, not a sigh for the blessing of rest.
In the sweet by and by we shall meet on that beautiful shore.

That isn't just wishing, that's hope. Amen.