

**SLD11.01.09 All Saints Day
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 11:38-44
Jill Oglesby Evans**

“Is There Life After Death?”

"I was lying in a room in the intensive care unit of a Seattle children's hospital," recalls Dean, a sixteen year-old boy, whose kidneys had stopped working. "Suddenly, I was standing upright and moving very quickly through dark space. I could not see any walls, but I thought that I was in a kind of tunnel. Although there was no wind, I felt that I was travelling with great speed. I did not understand where I was flying to or why, but I could feel that at the end of my flight something very important was waiting for me and I wanted to arrive at my destination as quickly as possible.

“At last I arrived at a place filled with light. It was here that I noticed someone next to me. He was tall with long golden hair dressed in white vestments girded with a belt in the middle. Even though He did not say anything, I was not afraid, because of the feelings of love and peace flowing from him. If it was not Christ, then it must have been one of His angels." After this, Dean felt himself return to his body and then he awoke. This brief and yet, very intense experience left a deep impression in Dean's soul. He became a very religious young man, which had a positive effect on his whole family.

Is this, one of the typical accounts collected by American pediatrician Melvin Morse, published in his book, Closer to the Light.¹ , what happens when we die? Similar accounts out-of-body experiences during death can be found In another well-received book, Life after Life , by Dr. Raymond Moody.² "Recollections of Death" by Dr. Michael Sabom, one-time professor of medicine at Emory University and currently a cardiologist in private

¹ http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/life_after_death.htm

² <http://www.amazon.com/Life-After-Investigation-Phenomenon-Survival-Bodily/dp/0062517392>

practice here in Atlanta, is another serious, systematic study on the phenomenon of life after death.

Long acknowledged expert on the process of dying, Swiss born psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, goes further than dying to death and after in her book Life After Death , in which she describe the process of death itself, jeopardizing her standing in the medical profession by asserting that she knew “beyond a shadow of a doubt” that there was life after death. Sabom is more cautious. "Personally, I believe in life after death," he says. "But I do not believe the work I have done *proves* life after death."³ Moody echoes this caution, insisting that whatever happens after death cannot be definitively proven one way or the other.

So what do you think? Are Morse, Moody, Sabom, and Kubler-Ross on to something?

Given the central revelation of the Christian faith – the resurrection of Jesus Christ – are we even *allowed* to ask the question of whether or not there is life after death? You’d think the matter’s already been settled for us. After all, as the Apostle Paul outlined to the church in Corinth, if there is no resurrection (which, of course, is another way of saying “life after death”), then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and our faith has been in vain (I Cor 15:15ff), and we might as well sleep in on Easter morning.

But whether or not we choose to sleep in on Easter, who can argue but that the question of what *really* happens after death remains for us all. Even if we wholeheartedly accept the revelation of Jesus’ resurrection, how can we help but wonder whether that

³ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,953356-3,00.html>

means God is going to raise *us* from the dead? And would that be right after we die, or way later at the end of the age when the trumpets sound and whatnot? And do you suppose *everyone* gets raised at the Second Coming or just us Christians? Or just us *Presbyterian* Christians? (Stay tuned for *that* sermon on November 22)

Who can help but wonder.

Don't think the early church was any better at addressing these questions than we are today. Remember that once the truth of his resurrection had finally penetrated the thick skulls of Jesus' first disciples, and he'd ascended, they figured he'd be back any minute. I mean, he *said* he would. But then....

Well... and those who came after the disciples were likewise pretty sure Jesus' coming was just around the corner. As were their children, and their children's children. Only after a while you couldn't help but notice how there weren't any observable perishable bodies putting on imperishability, or mortal bodies putting on immortality, and you had to wonder whether or not Death really *had* been swallowed up in victory. (1 Cor 15:51) 'Cause Jesus kept not coming, and the dead kept not rising, and everyone was getting kind of confused and maybe even a little skeptical about whether or not it was ever really going to happen.

Since then, Christian theologians of all stripes have had a field day trying to explain what they call the "delay of *parousia*," that pesky tardiness of the Second Coming and the end of the age and all its attendant benefits like the kingdom coming and the dead rising from their graves and joining with Jesus and so forth. Interpretations, evaluations and explanations abound, even as those stubborn millennialists keep issuing apocalyptic predictions of a world that just won't seem to end.

Still, in today's text, Jesus does call 4-day-dead Lazarus out of the tomb, and that's something. It does appear that Jesus has power over death, can beat it back, beat it down, at least for a while.

Lazarus is a friend of Jesus'. His sisters, Mary and Martha, are Jesus' friends, too, although at this point in the story, they're pretty upset, even accusatory, when Jesus doesn't show up on time to keep Lazarus from dying. Jesus himself weeps at the news of his friend's passing, though earlier he explains that he delayed his coming on purpose as an object lesson regarding how those who believe in Jesus will never die.

In any case, in front of Mary and Martha and everybody else gathered for the occasion, Jesus wows the crowd by calling Lazarus out of the tomb. Needless to say, everyone's jubilant, the way we always are when we get what we want. And, scripture says, "many of the Jews who witnessed what Jesus did believe in him." Hey, wouldn't you if Jesus showed up and raised from stinky death a friend or family member?

Seems to me life after death always come as a miracle. Speaking as an R.N., whenever anyone is grabbed last minute from the jaws of death, or brought back after death, even a professional crowd is wowed. Speaking as a human being, doesn't that sort of salvation always help remind us, if not of the death-defying power of Christ Jesus, at least in the astonishing fragility of life and the precious treasure of its remaining moments? Any time life beats or cheats death, and scrambles up off the floor for yet another round, who wouldn't praise God and celebrate just like Martha and Mary and all Lazarus' friends did? Being called out of a tomb is a fine thing.

But it's not the finest thing Jesus has to offer. Bringing people back from the dead is not his greatest miracle. Because getting up off death's floor for another round, loosening death's grip for another day, is really just postponing the inevitable, isn't it?

Sure, Lazarus got to live a little while longer but later didn't he die like any other mortal? Didn't Jairus' daughter, and the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, and everybody else in scripture who, thanks to Jesus, has a "near death," or "life after death," experience, don't they all end up dying later? Sure they do. Being called out of a tomb is definitely life-changing, but it ain't the same as resurrection.

Resurrection is different. When Jesus says to Martha that he *is* the resurrection, he's not talking about believing in him and just buying a little more time. There's a big difference between bringing someone back to life so she can die again later, and resurrecting new life that never dies. Raising the dead for more life on earth is pretty impressive, but it was *after* Jesus died that God *really* starting working through him. Jesus' successful CPR on Lazarus was unquestionably notable but it was nothing compared to the eternal life he offers.

Death happens. To us all. No way around it. We may not like talking about it but there it is. And death happened to Jesus. Really happened. But the whole holy hope, witness and testimony of our faith, friends, is not that we gain another few days or years of life the way we know it, but that God reached into the black, empty finality of Jesus' death, not "near death," mind you, not "clinical death," not "apparent death," just..."death," and wrenched, or beckoned, or somehow *created* resurrected life out of it. *New life. Eternal* life. Life that never dies. Life that the disciples couldn't imagine, even when they are told. Life that we can't imagine even when we are told. Life hardly anybody recognizes even when it was right there in front of us. Because the life God works through resurrection is not a function of the life we're inclined to imagine, hope and look for. Not even close. Resurrection life is not a product of the disciples' hope but of *God's* hope. Resurrection life is not an extension of a believer's imagination, it is the gracious fruit of *God's* imagination.

Resurrection life is not a predictable, describable, or measurable phenomenon because it doesn't issue not from our sensibilities or scientific standards, but from God's unfathomable and creative love. The only thing disciples can do with resurrection is *behold* it: the way Mary finally *beholds* resurrected Jesus standing right in front of her when, and only when, he calls her name; the way the disciples on the road to Emmaus behold Jesus when, and only when, Jesus sits at table with them and shares bread; the way vengeful Paul beholds Jesus, when, and only when, Paul's eyesight is taken away. The only thing disciples can do with resurrection is *behold* it when it's offered, when it's shared, when it's revealed.

With Stewardship Sunday next week, I want to name some of the ways I and others behold resurrection life in this church. Unexpected, unpredicted, eye-opening events that...well...surprise and delight us.

Like the unexpected monetary gift we recently received from the McMillan estate – a long-time if long ago member of this church who remembered to remember the church in her will. Or the energy and vision with which the Session is daring to allocate that money, as well as the energy and vision being directed these days through Outreach toward those disciples of Jesus Christ who “are not here yet.”

The atmosphere around Mission at this church is likewise crackling with resurrection life, as is Christian Education as it morphs into Discipleship and Spiritual Formation. But hey, I'm a paid cheerleader. Listen now to what some of the other leaders of this congregation have to say.

Deedra, Lilabet, Kathryn, Dan.

There are so many others who *could* speak: Sara about the competence and dedication of our staff this year. Nabb and Bennett about their plans to chair Church Life

this coming year. Those who have recently joined the church have a testimony, as does Jonathan, who's fixing to join today. Speaking volumes as well is the deepening of Session's own faith, the willingness of new elders to serve, the prospect of a permanent pastoral relationship. It's all adding up to a new chapter in this church's resurrection story.

After all, those who founded this church in 1941, all the ones on whose shoulders we stand this All Saints Sunday, are dead and gone. Or are they? Whatever their hopes and expectations, *we* – you and I, with Jesus Christ in our midst, *we* are the life after their death. Just as those who come after us, with Jesus Christ in their midst, will be the life after *our* deaths. We may not be able to recognize or imagine it – in 1941, how many members of this church would have imagined a woman in the pulpit or a labyrinth on the front lawn, or a female sexton? But our faith tells us we can always count on God to be working and revealing resurrected life in and through and beyond us. Not the kind of life that gets called out of the tomb only to die again later, but *resurrection* life, the kind through which God changes *everything* “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.”

(I Cor 15:51)

To the glory of God. Amen.