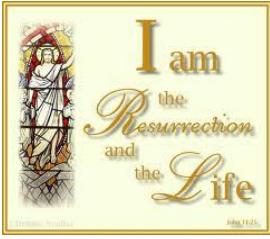


Grace and peace be yours from Jesus who is the Christ of God and from the Holy Spirit. Amen



In John's gospel story, Jesus says "*I am the resurrection and the life*" *John 11:25* And then he asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" The same question could be asked of each of us. Do you believe this? That answer is easy..... it is an emphatic Yes!

The difficulty is not with belief in the resurrection. The difficulty is with the world view and the metaphors which describe it. Because all of us are curious, we want to ask "What's next?" What does the resurrection look like? What does it mean?

First let's look at the world view In the biblical world view there is a three story universe. Heaven is up there, sheol, or the abode of the dead, or hell is down below, and this world is in the middle. And even though we don't share that world view any longer, we still speak of it in our every day language We still speak of sun rise and sun set as if it were the sun that was moving and not the earth turning. Similarly in our mythical language and depictions of life after death we still use spatial terms of up and down consider the imagery of the 1990 movie Ghosts or of cartoons that show a dead characters spirit floating up into heaven like an angel. So part of the problem with resurrection is that we don't believe in that world view any longer. But just because we reject the world view and cannot describe the "what's next?" does not mean we also reject the resurrection.

So what if we have difficulty describing "What's next?" This should not bother us. Even the Apostle Paul, had a difficult time expressing what comes next.



For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,... " *1 Cor. 13:12*

Do I believe and trust the scriptures? Yes. Do I understand their metaphors such as “My Father’s Mansion” or “heavenly thrones surrounded by white robed martyrs?” Yes, but I understand them, but what I cannot know is the reality that lies behind them. As metaphor’s they point to life beyond this life. But I cannot fathom what that will be like.

And its not only the spatial imagery of resurrection that provides difficulty, it is also the time imagery. What exactly is eternal life? If its eternal does that not also include the here and now?



Martin Luther King Jr, in his last speech before he was assassinated, said:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

And as we come up on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the dream, has not been fully realized. The peaceable kingdom is not yet reality, God’s will is still not fulfilled on earth. We still have much to do.

You see, I do not think of heaven so much as a future time or specific place certainly not up there. In fact I think most often of Heaven or the Kingdom of God, **as being a present reality among us, partially revealed, partially hidden from our eyes.** Our calling is to help bring it more fully into the light.

I believe that we, ... we are very much like the blind man Jesus healed in Mark's gospel story. Following the first attempt, after Jesus placed saliva in his eyes Jesus asked him,

"Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus touched his eyes a second time "and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." Mark 8:23-25

I believe that we are in that in-between stage, seeing, yes, but not fully seeing, believing, yes, but not knowing. Living in the reign of God today?, absolutely! But not completely. Is there more to come? Yes. Will it be fully revealed? Yes. When? That is the mystery of "What's next?" I would say, with the Apostle Paul, when this mortal body puts on immortality.



Behold, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality 1 Cor. 15:51-54

"What's next?" That is a mystery. But whatever lies ahead, I am not afraid of it. I am growing more and more at ease with that mystery all the time.



I mean, when you stop and think about it, images of Heaven are lame. Even with a halo, harp and wings, who wants to flit around eternity singing hymns. Never-the-less, what I believe, what I am as sure of as anything else in this life, is that the God who sustained, nurtured, and called me in this life will still be there to guide, nurture and care for me in whatever comes next. |And whatever that may be, I am not afraid.

I love two statements attributed to Martin Luther. In one, he said that **the after life is God's business, and so he did not have to worry about it.** In the other, he said **that we can know as little about life after death as a baby traveling down the birth canal can know about the world the baby is about to enter.**

As I grow in years, there increases within me a confidence to trust the faith and the relationship with God that has nurtured me and sustained me my whole life. Oh, it's not the same faith that I had as a child, it changes along the way; but then I am not that same child any longer either. Again St. Paul says:

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." 1 Cor. 13:11

Religion and faith changes down through the years. Religion functions differently at different stages of our life. It serves a guide post from early life to the end, but it's function changes along the way. **In youth**, the function of religion is the formation of a conscience. **In the middle years**, it functions as our social guide. It measures our relationships with others. Finally, **in these later years**, religion ushers us into the mystery of life and death.

Joan Chittister, in her book *The Gift of Years*, says:

It is the older members of society who not only teach us how to live. They also teach us how to die, how to make sense of the unity between life and death, and how to love life without fearing death – because we know ourselves to have been always on the way, even when we did not know where we were going.

As we age the dogmatics of youth matter less and less as they give way to the mystery of faith and based upon the experience of the lived journey.

Survey after survey tell us that Americans care less and less about the dogmas of youth and organized religion, but care more and more about spirituality, about relationship. In the end, it will not be denominationalism that wins the day but spiritual life, it is faith, it is soul that wins out.



As we age dogmas and certitude fade into the background, and the mystery of life begins to come center stage and loom before us. Now religion becomes about relationship with the Spirit, about the one who draws us upward and into the eternal now.

If God is grace, and I believe God is, then there is nothing to fear.

Most of life is all about teaching and preparing us for what we must do in order to survive the journey. Almost nothing points us to the days when time alone will be our guide and there are no more have to's to perform. When we are free to do whatever we choose, free to explore the mysteries of life. The Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow put it this way,

“For age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away
The Sky is filled with stares, invisible by day.”

We are free to, to explore those stars, to break old patterns and learn new ones, To go where we have never gone before. Being older is what gives us the opportunity to stray as we have never strayed in our lives. To enter into the mystery of it all. Trusting that the God who called and guided us in all that has gone before, will certainly remain with us in all that is yet to come.



We are not alone. God is with us. And we are with God, now we see dimly, then we shall see face to face. It is such a confidence that God remains with us that empowers us for daily living and for what is to come. Death holds no fear.

As a pastor I have been privileged to walk with many along the journey of life and death. I have come to not fear death in any way. I share the faith

of Martin Luther King Jr. Who in the heat of the civil rights struggle, who always lived close to the threat of death, could say with conviction that “I am not afraid to die!” When he entered Memphis and was told about threats on his life he continued forward. He was not concerned with “What’s next?”

And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? ... Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

Such faith, such confidence, allows us to love life without fearing death.

Henri Nouwen writes: The vision which grows in aging can lead us beyond the limitations of our human self. It is a vision that makes us not only detach ourselves from the preoccupation with the past but also from the importance of the present. It is a vision that invites us to a total and fearless surrender in which the distinction between life and death slowly loses its pain.

This is most sensitively expressed by Aldous Huxley in his description of the death of his first wife, Maria. With his hand on Maria’s head, he softly speaks to her:

“let go, let go go forward into the light. Let yourself be carried into the light. No memories, no regrets, no looking backwards, no apprehensive thoughts, about your own or anyone else’s future. Only light. Only this pure being, this love, this joy.”

With St. Paul we can say:

“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.” Romans

14:8

Amen.