

“What Happens When We Die?”
Revelation 22:5
May 29, 2016, Memorial Day Sunday
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

“What happens when we die?” I bring you this topic this Memorial Day weekend because I know that people often visit the graves of their loved ones and often decorate graves over this weekend. It is also a time when we are thankful for those who have made the supreme sacrifice so that we might breathe free air.

“What happens when we die?” is the most frequently asked question to me in my forty-four years of pastoral care of people. I have talked to colleagues about it and it seems universal within my circle of clergy friends. In my early years of ministry I talked with my mentor Dr. Richard Cromie a lot about it. We both had our theories, his from more years of practical experience than mine and mine from the latest seminary teaching. Then one day he told me about his own mother’s experience of clinical death and I will share that with you before we our done this morning.

What happens when we die? The question has been around since people first walked the earth. You can find it on cave walls in the drawings of our early ancestors who were searching for the meaning of life and death. All primitive societies joined in this mighty question.

Some people I have met pretend to know. A clerk at the Wal-Mart store here in Athens told me one day exactly what happens when we die. She, a Pentecostal, was surprised that I did not know. A Mormon told me one day in great detail.

Cromie told me about the time he went to a Jehovah Witness Church to a friend’s funeral. The pastor there at Kingdom Hall spelled it out as directly as he might tell you how to turn on your computer. He said the deceased would remain in the ground, asleep for some period of time. Then she would go to a heavenly realm, to a waiting chamber, to be joined with all the others waiting for judgment. Then when that time period was over, the deceased would be taken directly before the Lord. He would look at the record of what the person had done on earth, but realizing that this one was a Witness, he said the decease would have all the other entrance rules waived and would go directly into the numbered company of the faithful ones who had departed this mortal life. There the person would remain for as long as it pleased the Lord. He went on to say that a person could be expelled from heaven for bad behavior. That was a new thought, but he put it in the same category of how some angels had been expelled from heaven.

If we did a quick survey here this morning I would bet that most of you would say that “life lives beyond the grave.” We believe that in his death, Christ paid the penalty of sin: “God loved the world so much that he gave his son for our salvation.” But here at First Presbyterian Church we don’t have a written document that describes what heaven is or is not in detail. Hell, Christianity teaches is a separation from God. Heaven is being in the presence of God. It seems fair to most that God would separate the good people from the evil people. But that isn’t clear either.

The Bible does not have a simple explanation either. It is not that I am reluctant to tell you or that I haven't looked. It just isn't there. You have to go to several different books of the Bible and assemble the ideas and images and then decide which ones make sense to you, which seem helpful.

John Calvin, our theological father, chided people in the Christian Institutes under the chapter "Last Things" for wanting to know too much. He said, "We shouldn't inquire any further than what Christ has told us."

"No one really knows what happens when we die," Pascal added, the most we can do is "to bet our lives" that our concept of heaven and how we get there is true. If we are wrong and remain asleep in the ground, then nothing has been lost. Socrates said the same thing, "I have nothing to lose in believing it."

If we started in the Old Testament for ideas, in the early Old Testament with the lives of the patriarchs from Abraham through Jacob and the twelve tribes: What happened on earth was enough. A well-lived life carried its own merit. As long as their descendants, the Chosen People of God, were faithful all was right with the world. When Abraham died, "he was gathered with his fathers." That meant they were buried together. When Jacob died, he "breathed his last." His concern was not whether he would go to heaven, but that his twelve sons and their children would not forget his name or his fathers. So long as someone remembered you and someone carried on your name and faith, you were not gone from the earth. I still hear echoes of that today when people ask family and friends, "Please don't forget me when I am gone."

The New Testament continues the movement in the direction of everlasting life. Curiously, Jesus didn't have much to say about it in his teachings. In Matthew, Mark and Luke his teachings take on a wider view. For example: in Matthew 25, the sheep will be separated from the goats, by virtue of what kind of life they lived on earth. His mention that there would be no marriages in heaven comes as a response to the question about the woman who had seven husbands and whose wife she would be in heaven? There is no doubt that Jesus believed in heaven and in hell too, but his teachings seem to say we will be rewarded by what we do.

It was not until Paul started writing about thirty years after Jesus' resurrection that the issue took on a new character. Paul had to reassure the believers that Jesus would not forget the ones who had already died. Remember they thought that Jesus would return during their lifetime and take them up into heaven. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul raised the discussion to a different level when he explored the highest reaches of the Resurrection in Christ where we shall all be changed. He says, "it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." He didn't tell us exactly what that means. Anyone can see that a physical body does not survive death, but it is imperative that we recognize each other in eternity, or there would be no point in reaching it. That is what is meant when we affirm our belief in the Resurrection of the body. The "total person" survives, not just an amorphous soul.

What happens when we die? There are two options in the New Testament that are not incompatible. **First, in** Thessalonians, Paul writes "When the Lord himself descends from heaven ... the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left shall be caught up

together ... to meet the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:13) It seems to say that the dead will be as asleep. They will sleep on until Christ returns. When he does, they will be raised to a newness of life. I think you can think of it that way, they are asleep, waiting.

The second option is clearly seen at the crucifixion. It seems to say we will go immediately to heaven when we die. When the penitent thief declared his faith on the cross, Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The word is clear, “this very day.” I prefer this concept. Paul was concerned that those who had already died would be included in the resurrection. Jesus was more concerned to reassure the dying thief for his faith.

A secondary question related to this concept is something people ask me a lot, “Do those who are gone know what is going on, on earth? Can they hear us or see us or communicate with us? I want to avoid the séance kind of possibility, but I think they do know what is going on, and I think the Bible teaches us that, too. Why those who are gone cannot or do not speak to us is no less puzzling to me than why God himself does not talk directly to his children on earth. In the Bible the best scene for this is Hebrews 11 & 12, where the faithful dead surround us with their presence and their love. “A cloud of witnesses is there,” the author writes. I often feel the presence of that cloud of witnesses.

In more recent times, starting about forty years ago there has arisen a whole library of books on what happens after we die. The leader of the early books was Life After Life by Dr. Raymond Moody. Being the first it had a lukewarm reception; token interest and some professional ridicule. Dr. Moody had discovered a familiar pattern in interviewing people who had experience what you might call “clinical death.” Those who had “come back to life,” describe similar experiences. Usually they saw a tunnel, filled with light, through which they traveled.

When they got through to the other side, many of them reported that they were happy, calm, peaceful and content. The battles and worries of this life were over. Often they saw people they had known who had already died, waiting for them on the other side. No one ever reported seeing a person who was still alive on earth in this “after life.” Moody took it as a kind of proof that there was a continuation of life beyond death.

Many books followed with the more recent Heaven Is for Real and Waking Up in Heaven. Just google the topic and you will have your summer reading list of books. Betty Eadie’s book Embraced by the Light is one of the more popular. She died one night in a hospital. She saw her soul leave the body and then an angelic friend flew her off to see that her husband and children were alright and then it was off to heaven. She met Jesus and he answered all her questions just like he said he would. I don’t know what you think about it. I do know it is a lovely thought.

Some psychiatrists belittle these experiences by now recorded in the thousands. Many hold that they were simply visions or dreams which a dying person conjures up to explain the brain’s demise. Having been told stories all through life about what happens when we die the brain manufactures an explanation of what is going on. Then when their journey to the next world is interrupted, and they come back to their mortal lives and bodies, they report “their dreams” critics say, as if they were real.

It might puzzle you to learn that people who have these afterlife experiences are about equally split between those who believe in God and those who do not. And, among believers, no more than one-half are Christians. It would be better for Easter sermons, if everyone who survived death in these studies was a believing Christian. But not so. It seems to indicate that God deals with each and all of his children without bias.

Now back to Cromie for one more story before we go. Richard told me this story about his mother who I knew quite well and a more down to earth practical person you would be hard pressed to meet. I knew that she had had a heart attack and that she was quite ill. She had been pronounced clinical dead, she stopped breathing. A few weeks later he told me, “Three days after Mom’s heart attack she grabbed hold of my hand one evening after everyone else had left and said, ‘Richie I have to tell you something.’ She told him she saw herself go off the table, and to a great white shining light. Through the tunnel where in heaven she said she saw her father, her sister, her brothers, some friends, her mother. She saw other people that she knew. She said, “Richard, it was as if they had gathered at the entrance to welcome me. It was wonderful.”

In a little while she was reluctantly drawn back. She heard the doctor say “Breathe” and she wondered why, but she did. She saw herself coming down into her body on the table. But she said she did not want to come back, it was too beautiful and lovely and painless over there. She said, “The nicest thing about it is I will never fear death again.”

Well, I am not entirely sure what to think, except to say these **two things: death is the** termination of life on earth. There is no second chance to come back and do it again. So do everything you can while you are here to receive and share the love of God. **And secondly, give** your life to Christ and follow in his way, and you will live with him and with those you love, for now and evermore.