

“Resurrection and Eternal Life What is it?”

(a sermon based on John 11:17-27, page 105 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

A PARABLE ABOUT LIFE by Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale ("Guideposts")

by

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On this first Sunday after Easter, one weeks after the amazing and inspiring events that promised *renewed life* to the Jesus movement, we find ourselves still speaking (in a deep way) about the meaning of life and death.

I decided to return to the story of the death of Lazarus, Jesus’ friend, to help us *unpack our thinking* about life and death, resurrection, and eternal life. I do so, first, because it is a story that predates the resurrection of Jesus, and articulates the Jewish thinking that undergirds the claims of Easter. I chose that story, secondly, because Christian Brost preached a great sermon a few weeks ago about *the disciples’ role* in the Lazarus story – especially their decision to go with Jesus to the gravesite, assuming that the authorities would be waiting for Jesus to arrest him. “*Let us go with him,*” said Thomas, “*so we might die with him.*” It was a touching testimonial; a brave thing to do.

Easter raises a natural question for speculation: What happens when we die? What is all this talk about “eternal” life, or “everlasting” life, or life here-after with God in heaven. How do we imagine it?

We’ve all grown up with various stories of what happens to the person – that it, the personality (not the body itself, per se, but the soul or spirit) – the essence of the person we have known and loved. When we close our eyes in death, what then? Lazarus came out of his tomb when Jesus called his name. What was he coming *from*? What had he experienced in those four days dead?

Is it possible that the dead will rise? Is it possible to imagine (as in the song: “Ain’t No Grave”) that *our own burial places* will be found empty, not because of natural decay, but because our life-spirit has gone elsewhere?

Easter is the season in which the Christian Church says: “*Yes!* There *is* life beyond the grave. There is eternal life and *we’re in it* already. Believe it.” I also wonder whether Lazarus was grateful to have been called back across that great divide by Jesus, or whether he would have preferred to have stayed.

The promise of “*resurrection*” is a *Jewish concept* that was brought to life in the Easter story of Jesus’ leaving his empty tomb behind. It differs from the Hindu belief in “*reincarnation*,” which is the *rebirth* of a soul into a *new* human or animal form; a fresh embodiment of one’s continuing life force in something other than your own body, as something else on earth. Lazarus was not reincarnated; he was revived. *Resurrection* denotes “revival” – the word derives from “resurgence” – bringing back into use, bringing back into form, that which has disappeared. We might also think of “*resuscitation*” -- to *stir back into action* -- to “*revive*” from apparent death.

When the Jews of Jesus’ day spoke of “*resurrection*,” they meant that there would be a *general resurrection* of all humanity, a bringing back to life all those persons who had died, for a *final judgment* by God, their Creator. The followers of Jesus, however, who experienced first-hand Jesus’ return – who felt the resurgence and revitalization of their movement – said that Jesus had already ushered in *the resurrection of the dead*, beginning with himself. They went on to tell the whole world that death was not the end of the story!

There was no need for the dead to await Gabriel’s final trumpet call *to rise up from their graves*, for Jesus had already begun the “harrowing of hell” (breaking the chains of the devil, setting the captives of Death free). Jesus had *already opened* the gates of heaven, so that all may come in. No need to wait! One by one, through faith in Christ – who is the Way, the Truth, & the Life – eternal life was opened for everyone. The *raising of Lazarus from the dead* ten days before Easter was merely a forerunner (an appetizer) of the real thing.

That's the Easter claim. We are already enjoying *eternal life* with Jesus Christ, here and now; so when we die, it is nothing to worry about – it's not a final judgment of condemnation, it is a *coming home* to the one who loves us.

One way to think of the dying process was popularized by the late Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale (long-time author and editor of the "Guideposts" publishing house) in what he calls "a parable of Life." He writes:

Imagine a baby in prenatal state, tucked up under her mother's loving heart. Suppose someone were to come to this unborn baby, and say: "Sweetheart, you cannot stay here very long. In a few months you will be born – that is, your life here will end. You will die to this place in order to be born into something new."

The baby might stubbornly say: "But I don't want to leave here! I'm already alive. Furthermore, I am comfortable, and well cared for. I'm warm, loved, & happy here. I don't want to die to this place and be born into some-thing new. No, I won't go."

But in the normal course of events, she is born. And then what does she find? She feels beneath her, strong loving arms. She looks up into the loving face of her mother. Everyone runs to meet her needs and to give her pleasure. She is welcomed, and cuddled; cared for.

She might say to herself: "How foolish I was. This is a wonderful place to which I've come; a wonderful family that includes me. I'm so happy here. I was alive then, and I'm still alive now. It didn't really end at all."

Then she goes on to develop as a child: a tomboy tagging along after her brothers, learning to walk and to play, enjoying all the wondrous delights of childhood. Animals and fresh air, learning about things. She grows into her youth, with all its excitement and romance. She meets and marries, and soon her own children play about her. She holds their little hands and knows their love. So the years pass; the achievements and the joy of living is hers.

And then she becomes old. Her hair is white. Her step is slower. Her natural energy abates. Someone comes to her and says: "Sweetheart, you cannot stay here. You are going to die, or one might say: you will be born out of this place into another."

And again she might resist, saying: "But I don't want to die from here. I am alive, and I like this place. It is warm and pleasant and I have my loved

ones. I love this world -- the outdoors, watering the garden -- the dawning and sunsets, the moon at night, and the starlight. I like to feel the warmth of the summer breeze on my face. I like to see the swaying palms and swim in the sea. I like the springtime and summertime and the fall and winter. I love this world. I don't want to leave it!"

But there comes a time when, in the natural course, she dies. What happens then? Is God the Creator suddenly going to change God's nature?

Or can we not assume that she will feel once again loving arms beneath her, and once again look up into a beautiful face -- her mother, her beloved, her brothers and sisters who had gone before her, and her maker/God, the presence of Jesus more beautiful even than that first face she saw so long ago... Won't she soon be exclaiming: "Why this is wonderful! This place is surpassingly beautiful! I love this new life. Here I want to remain forever!"

I love James Weldon Johnson's poetry in God's Trombones, when he tells of God calling home his Sister. It's dramatic, rich with biblical images, and yet touching and tender. For "Death" is not an enemy, but a **messenger angel**. And every angel from God is **a bearer of Good News**, if we simply accept it as such and welcome it with faith. Christian death is not to be feared.

I remember a few years ago when our church member Jack Allen died. On the day Jack died, he had told the nurse he wanted to be with his loving wife, LueVara, who had died some six and a half years earlier. He was tired. Jack was ready to **be with her again**.

I also think back on the funeral for my cousin's husband **Carlos**, who had drowned while trying (unsuccessfully) to save my other cousin Jeremy. The minister at that service said that Carlos -- an active church member and one of the nicest guys you would ever meet, father of four boys -- **was "ripe fruit"** which had grown as **mature** and whole and rich as one could wish, and had been plucked by the divine hand. On the next day, at my cousin **Jeremy's** funeral, the minister said he had been **a light** in many lives, and now he was a **star** in heaven. There are so many stars in the night sky, that you won't notice

one more, but Jeremy carries *the light of life* and the light of Christ *forever in God's presence*. These are just a couple of the many ways we express our faith in eternal life, and it gives great comfort to those of us left behind.

The classical writers (such as Vergil) described the passage from life to death as being “*rowed across the River Styx*” by the silent boatman *Charon*. Christians changed the name of the River *Styx* to the River *Jordan*, and dying became (for us) moving into the Promised Land. “*Shall we gather at the river?*”

However, unlike the classical writers, the New Testament writers assure us that we will be met by *a loving God* and by all the saints who preceded us. None of the terrors of mythological Hades belongs in the Christian Gospel.

In the Greek myth of “Hades” (Roman: “Pluto”) things were not so pleasant -- arriving souls were met by a fearful *three-headed hound* that guarded the gates (not unlike the dog Harry Potter met in the attic at Hogwarts in Book One). According to the legend of Hades, the goddess *Persephone* was kidnapped by *Hades* and taken into his underworld, where only the dead were supposed to reside. A *living* creature like Persephone was not supposed to gain entrance to the land of the Dead, any more than *Jesus* (the giver of Life) should have been there. Persephone's mother, *Demeter*, bargained for her release. The agreement was that Persephone would *return to Hades* for four months of each year -- hence, the dormant growing season of winter, when *the life-force of the fertility goddess* is “underground”. As we come out of the dormant winter months, it is as though *Spring itself* – with twittering birds, new bright sunlight, budding trees, blossoming flowers – is a symbol of revival, resurrection, the possibility of New Life for the whole of God's world.

The return of Persephone from Hades to the land of the living marked the spring revival of fertility in the land. It was celebrated by the Romans and the Greeks much like we do *Easter*. Similarly, the Egyptian myth of *Isis and Osiris* parallels the yearly rebirth of vegetation. *Every* agricultural culture had such stories. Images of *Spring revival* and Easter resurrection *merged* in early Christianity; hence, Easter bunnies & colored eggs, baby lambs and chicks...

In another parallel from ancient Egypt (1500 years B.C.E.), the Pyramid Text “*Amduat*” (the “The Hidden Chambers”) describes the dying pharaoh’s journey *into the night*, accompanied by the sun god **Ra** in his celestial boat (who makes the journey every 12 hours before rising again to rule the day). It gives *the dying person* instructions for passing through all the dangers and difficulties to be found in the underworld. It’s an adventure story that would put Indiana Jones to shame, but so the ancient people thought of the afterlife – a busy, dangerous place, with a wild cast of characters. You don’t want to go there; but everyone will, in time. So get yourselves ready! The book of the dead.

Other myths about dying & rising that influenced the church in the Middle East would include the “*phoenix*,” a bird which supposedly inhabited *Arabia* and was sacred to the sun god **Ra**. The phoenix (we are told) lived for 500 years and then was voluntarily consumed by fire in order to rise from its own ashes to regain youthful life. (In the Harry Potter books, **Wizard Dumbledore** owns a phoenix, of course! It takes on more importance as the series matures.)

The *migration of souls* when they pass from this life – usually described as across a river and into a netherworld – seems to be a universal belief in many forms. Particularly for English-speaking Christians, **Norse** mythology depicted the land of the dead as *a frozen place* given to Odin’s daughter “Hel” to rule, from whence we get the phrase “until Hell freezes over.” Few of the ancient religions, however, include *reincarnation* or *rebirth* for the one who dies. We get that from the East.

In ancient India, for example, the basic idea of “reincarnation” *as a cycle of rebirths* was believed to be a forward-moving process. In Hindu belief (from about 1,000 B.C.E.), the principle of *cause & effect*, plus the ethical principle of *reward* or *retribution*, got mixed into the cycle of “*karma*” and gave rise to the idea that a person would be *punished* for bad acts by reappearing in some *lower* life form, and *rewarded* for good deeds with an elevated reincarnation.

You may be wondering why I have taken so much precious sermon time

in the “Easter season” to tell you of *alternative* ideas of life & death? Because in today’s cafeteria-style “eclectic” American spirituality, *pieces* of each of these ancient myth-systems has gotten mixed-in with our Christian Gospel to influence our ideas of what the “afterlife” will be like. “Resurrection” is no longer our only option; Easter is no longer the dominant story regarding death.

All these other classic notions (as well as New Age innovations) have come together in the modern American mind as alternatives to the Christian concept of eternal life with God. Of course, there’s no way to *dispute* anyone’s teachings about “life after death,” because *there is no objective criteria* (apart from our own *belief*) by which we can “prove” what form our personal immortality will actually take. *We simply don’t “know.”* (Can I say that? Will you still respect me as your Pastor if I admit that we “don’t know”?)

Furthermore, because so much of what is said about “heaven” is poetry, metaphor, open-ended imagery (like hidden treasure, a pearl of great price, a seed, a kingdom), it allows a great deal of room for *speculation* about what it will be like to “meet God” and what it will be like “in heaven” after death. Much of the church’s *traditional teachings* about life-after-death, judgment, even doctrines of hell & heaven have been *justified* by citing *parts* of the Book of the Revelation. Frankly, there is so much *Sturm und Drang*, “Shock & Awe” chaos and conflict, beasts and other make-believe characters, that I have little use for the Apocalypse of John’s Revelation, except for the part we read as today’s Call to Worship where “God dwells with us, wiping every tear from our eyes; where Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” (Rev. 21:1-6)

Doctrines related to what “heaven” will be like (specifically describing “life after death”), such as those words from the Apocalypse, are examples of people trying to put *an abstract belief* into words...

On one side, the early Church had the “dualistic” ideals of Greek philosophy: where heaven was “*an eternity of perfection.*” ... Where our immortal “spirit”-life (or soul) will exist in a “time-less” realm that will be

“un-ending” & “never-changing” because we are with God forever. To use the Apostle Paul’s language in explaining resurrection to the Corinthians:

“What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable; what is sown in dishonor is raised in power. What is buried is a physical body, what is raised is a spiritual body... And when this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory!” Where, O grave, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?” (I Corinthians 15:42-44,54-55)

That *assumption* of “putting on” eternal perfection in heaven is drawn from Greek thinking -- Greek philosophical speculation -- not from the experience of anyone’s “*reality*”.

On the other side, we have images of heaven that are *active, dramatic*, much more like actual “lived experience.” Some with rewards & retribution; others with a cast of otherworldly-characters. In any case, it is hard to find eternal perfection there!

Both ideas of heaven (the abstract “immortality” and the more *dynamic* vision of *Revelation*) have been taught by Christians throughout history. *Which do you* hold? Which *belief* gives you the most comfort?

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I approach the topic of life-after-death by first considering what “life” is *really* like. *Actual “lived experience” is full of changes.* Life is varied, busy, uncertain... Seasons change, day turns to night, things grow (and then die and then decay), *living things adapt & mature*, we age. We measure time by movement & by changes. *Life is “dynamic”, not “static.”*

By definition, things that are “perfect” do not change. But *things that don’t change, are not alive*; “time” has no meaning for things that don’t move. So, *to imagine a heaven that is eternally “unchanging”* (as the Greek ideal of perfection would imply) takes away the very characteristic that makes life so *lively*.

Heaven as a state of “*permanence*” where *time and change are no more*, strikes me as dull and dead. How can we “experience” something that’s absolutely unchanging? *To “experience” is to take account of something that is “outside oneself” and allow it to “affect” our self.* Experiences change us. We *feel* them. Experiences become *part* of us; they make us who we are, moment by moment.

Even trivial things, like the words I am saying here this morning, are “experiences” that may affect how you read the Bible from now on. Even if you forget the content of this sermon (these prayers, this worship service), it has affected each of us in some way. *We are not the same now as we were before.* That’s life! (Traumatic experiences, of course, are much more “memorable”; but *every* experience brings change.)

So, *what does it mean to “experience” heaven?* Watch out how you answer that...!

Once personal experiences are admitted as part of our belief in heaven, we no longer can assume it to be a realm of absolute changelessness. *If we believe we will have further personal experiences* beyond death, then the series of actual occasions & events that make up who we are will continue. *The “self” will continue; change will be possible. We’ll have *new* experiences!*

On the other hand, if we abandon any sense of further personal experience in the hereafter, *believing instead in permanence (perfection, changelessness)*, then our “immortality” will consist as a completed soul (a non-experiencing entity, perhaps *a drop* in the *ocean* of God) for all eternity.

Now, there’s nothing *wrong* about this image of immortality: *an unchanging eternity of perfection in God.* After all, this is probably what many people think! We all become “one” in the embrace of our loving God.

There is always the possibility that our lives will continue to have an impact in the world long after we are gone, even if we no longer have any further subjective experiences. *Others experience us;* they take something from us into themselves. They remember encounters with us; they may read

our words, sing our songs, use our inventions. Thus, *the world itself is permanently enriched* by every goodness or act of love we perform. I believe we can live steadfast, faithful lives, when we know that *in the Lord our deeds are not in vain*. There is a bit of immortality in every action we take.

Even if we do our deed in secret, *God* knows! Not only do we affect the world, I believe that God's own self is actually "magnified" by the goodness of each life. *God retains & remembers all! Nothing of value is ever lost*. So, in this fashion, there is a kind of immortality to every one of us. At the completion of our life, as we are taken up to God, the record of our life is "read back" to us; our lives are evaluated by (what the Revelation calls) "*the books of our works*."

Books are kind of old fashioned, so I imagine it'll be less like *reading* and *more like a video* (or better yet "*virtual reality*"!), where we will be able to *experience* the effect that our life has had on the world -- *re-living* (in God's complete knowledge) *our lives*. In God, then, we will be able to enjoy the *good* we helped to realize. None of it is forgotten by God. Only the *evil* will be expunged; no sad memories!

Re-living the good, and *knowing* that we have had an *impact* on *the world* for its betterment, is only *one* of the ways we might understand "immortality." We could say that is our "objective" immortality: *the lasting consequences* for our having lived. This kind of immortality, however, is limited to *recalling experiences from the past*. Will there not be possibilities for further experiences *in the future*?

Some folks may say, no. *Dead is dead, done, over forever*. Even those who of us, who believe in an "eternal heaven" as a perfect *resting place* for the soul, may have difficulty imagining any further "subjective" experiences of the souls who dwell there.

So whether one is an unbeliever, who imagines total "annihilation" of the self at death; or a believer, who imagines a "perfect" heaven, where all will be unchanging and timeless, eternal and forever, both have assumed "*permanence*" in death. There will be no further changes.

If there are *no further subjective experiences* to be had beyond death,

then the only lasting meaning we will have is the hope that *others still living* will remember us & our works. If so, that “objective” immortality I just described becomes our greatest hope.

How much more gratifying (to me) is an image of heaven that is *alive; dynamic*, not static; always *changing* and adapting as each soul encounters new experiences. Yes, friends, I am suggesting there is a *continuation* of subjective experiences *beyond death!* I believe that *the “self” that I am* as I go through the experiences of this life (as I learn & grow, mature & change) will not be “terminated” at death. All that changes is *the environment* in which I will be doing my further experiencing.

I believe that you & I will *continue* to have *experiences* in *God’s heaven* which will change us.

And so, “death” (to me) is less like a period that ends a sentence, and more like a comma -- where our loved ones, though *set apart from us* in our physical world, continue to live in the direct presence of God & with all who have gone before.

And I know that sounds very *traditional* -- trusting that “*the circle will be unbroken*” in the *sweet by-&-by*, that “when the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there!” -- but *I believe it!* Just like that. It is my hope; my faith.

The ordinary environment in which you and I “experience” ourselves is our body. We gain experiences through our senses, *limited though they are*. Our new environment, in God, will not be so limited.

The new environment, when our perishable body has been set aside, will be *in a direct inclusion with God’s own self*, where the subsequent reality of *my* self (and *your* self) will continue to experience reality (*as it is in God*); and we will continue to change, but without any bodily attachment to the material world. I believe that heaven includes *new experiences* for us!

I wonder whether Lazarus was grateful to have been called back across that great divide by Jesus, or whether he was glad to have moved along. I

wonder, too, whether Jesus would have come back (as we will experience him in the coming weeks, making several appearances to his disciples) if it were not for the fact that they seemed to have lost faith without him. Their doubts and fears had become too strong to allow the movement to flourish in his absence after the Crucifixion and his Easter rising. *Jesus came back, time & again*, over the course of the next 40 days, *to resassure them* that the Resurrection and the Life could be *trusted* and they need not fear the grave.

The disciples needed to believe that God was *with them* in the end. Forever. The Alpha and the Omega, from the beginning to the end. That's the kind of God we have; and that's how the story ends... as *God* tenderly bends down to wipe away every tear. Yes, there will be tears in heaven, but God, like a loving mother, or a good friend, *will wipe them away*. That's something new! That's "experiencing" heaven! That's our promised land.

Amen.