

Do you believe in life after death? Do you?

The question of life after death comes up when someone you know well dies. Have you ever been present when someone died? They may have been suffering or just struggling for breath or simply slipping away. But at some point, they just cease to exist. Their spirit “goes”. They just are not with us anymore.

This is someone you had known and spoken with/ someone whose every movement came from a mysterious source of life within them/—a candle burning bright in darkness—/ that someone has suddenly vanished. The mouth is the same one that talked and laughed. But the person is gone.

As much as we try to deny it, death is very much a part of human life. And the question of what happens after death is a question very alive and well in our society today.

The question of what happens after our death was a key question in Jesus’ time as well. In today’s reading from chapter 11? of Luke’s gospel, we hear Jesus debating with the Sadducees about the resurrection. Sadducees were the fundamentalists of their day who believed only in the first five books of the Bible (the Torah).

And since there is no mention of resurrection after death in the Torah, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. They believed that your spirit only lived on in your descendants, children and grandchildren. The Sadducees had a running argument with another religious group called the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus was much closer to the position of the Pharisees.

The Sadducees try to trap Jesus by posing a question to him. IF a man has seven brothers and take on his widow as their wife, when they get to heaven, whose wife will she be? (expand)

Family is so essential to the Sadducees that they cannot imagine life without a family. Jesus explains that life after the resurrection will be so full that there will be no need to marry or have children.

(pause)

We may think that all this discussion seems rather far removed from us today. But is it really? We have our own version of this sort of Sadducee position; and Jesus' answer to the Sadducees prompts it. When Jesus said that people aren't married in heaven, he tells them; they are like the angels of God, who also don't marry. What?!, some people today would respond,

What?!. Is there no sex in heaven? Then how could it be heaven?" Obviously, many of our contemporaries think that there can't be any such thing as heaven since the best things in life couldn't happen there! Jesus responds by saying that communion with God is something so great that it cannot even be imagined on earth!

Then we might ask, "Just what would heaven be like?" We get hints of what that communion with God might be like from a number of people who have had near death experiences and returned to tell their stories. One of the most famous ones was a neurosurgeon, Dr. Eben Alexander. While in his mid thirties he contracted a rare virus which ate away at the outer cortex of his brain. He was brain dead for seven days, an amazingly long time of which humans simply do not return to health. But he did and he tells his story in a book called "Proof of Heaven".

It is important to note that Dr. Alexander was an agnostic. While his wife was a believer in God, he was not. In his unconscious state in the hospital, Dr. Alexander reflects on his experience in these words,

“I still remembered nothing of my earthly past, and yet I was not less for this. Even though I’d forgotten my life down here, I had remembered who I really was out there. I was a citizen of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled entirely by love.” (p 95)

Let me repeat his words “I was a citizen of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled entirely by love.” Is not that what Jesus was trying to teach us? We are all citizens of heaven and it is ruled by the love of God which Jesus was trying to make visible to us.

In the 14th Chapter of John’s gospel Jesus himself faced human loss in the death of his good friend, Lazarus. Remember when he broke down in tears when he met with Lazarus’ sister. Then he challenged her with his belief in the resurrection. “Your brother will rise again.” She replied, “Yes, my brother will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus went on, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever dies believing in me will come to life and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? She answers, “Yes, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Is not this verbal exchange between Jesus and Martha another way of expressing Dr. Alexander's words, "We are all citizens of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled by love." Jesus would say it more simply in John's gospel chapter ___ "As the Father has loved me, so I love you, live on in my love."

The astounding good news about Jesus' words is that we do not need to wait until death to begin to experience the universe ruled by love. We can begin participating in that world now.

Do you believe in heaven? Do you? Then live as citizens of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled by love. Let love be the rule and measure of who you are and what you will become.