



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

10-10-10 "Life after Death"
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 25, 2023

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

This is the 2nd of the 10-10-10 summer sermons series – 10 ten-minute sermons on the ten subjects you have chosen. The title for today's homily is "Life after Death." And it is your 2nd most favorite topic. We did not manipulate the readings for today so that they would line up with the 10-10-10 sermons you have chosen. But they do. It must be the Holy Spirit at work among us.¹

I think this sermon should be entitled "Life after Life," because I believe life continues after our earthly death, just more fully. We know that there is life after life on this earth, because Christ Jesus put an end to death. We are in God's presence now, yes, because of God's son through the Holy Spirit. But after this life, I trust that we will know God more fully when we are in God's presence face-to-face, and when we are with our brother Christ continuously. That is what heaven means to me, being in a closer relationship with God the Father and God's son, Jesus Christ our Lord – all the time and for eternity. This is the promise we have by Christ's victory over death. Jesus died for our sins so that we and everyone would inherit eternal life. But what about those who do not believe in universal salvation? Is anyone excluded? What about those who do not accept that Jesus died for our sins? Will they have life after life? What about the shooter who killed the innocent children and teachers in that Uvalde, Texas school? What about the uncle that molested us? The father that beat us? The sister that betrayed us? What about ourselves when we feel that we are undeserving of everlasting life with Christ? Where do we draw the line? My friends, it is not up to us draw that line!² God allowed his own son to die so all could be saved. All!

"From our last breath on Earth to our first in God's presence, a Christian's destination is to be with God forever."³ Steve Jobs shared his views on Christianity and the possibility of an afterlife with his biographer Walter Isaacson. Jobs' parents had raised him in the Lutheran Church, faithfully going to worship every week. But when he was 13

after asking his pastor why God would knowingly allow suffering he decided to never return to church. He rejected his Christian faith and was influenced by Buddhism. He was not sure if God existed. Isaacson said of Jobs after his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer: “He admitted that, as he faced death, he might be overestimating the odds out of a desire to believe in an afterlife... Jobs said: “I’m about 50/50 on believing in God. I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your consciousness endures.” As he lay dying, he told his wife and children and his sister that he was sorry not to have grown old with them as he had planned, but that he was “going to a better place.” A better place. And his last words, as he looked over their shoulders into life after death, were “Oh Wow. Oh Wow. Oh Wow.”⁴ Wow, indeed! My sisters and brothers, Steve Jobs and we all are saved and are inheritors of eternal life, whether we know and accept it or not!

As I write this homily, I am mourning the death of Mary Jane, the mother of one of my dearest friends. Her daughter Jan is a sister of my choosing. When Mary Jane died this week, I remembered that I had helped bury her younger daughter Susie some years ago. And then I was privileged to spend a week with their Mom as the rest of the family cleaned out Susie’s home. We drove around in her brand new red Cadillac visiting places she wanted me to see. We talked about life. We talked about death. We talked about the future of life without her baby girl in it. Jan asked me for suggestions of readings for her Mom’s funeral. So I have been immersed in those readings as I was preparing for this “life after life” homily. And those readings affirm my certainty that Mary Jane is with the Lord in heaven experiencing life after life!

One of my favorite readings for funerals is what we affectionately call Paul’s love letter to the church in Corinth. You remember: Love is patient, love is kind... love never ends. I want to suggest that Paul’s Epistle that is so often used in marriages is also so appropriate for burials of our loved ones, because indeed love never ends. The whole of the Bible – the Old and New Testaments, particularly the Gospels – speaks of God’s overwhelming love for us and Christ’s expression of that love and his dying for our sins to put an end to death as we know it. Paul’s Letter to the Romans affirms that Christ was

raised from the dead so that “we too might walk in newness of life” so that we will be “united with him in a resurrection like his” and death did not have dominion over him and it does not have dominion over us.⁵ My friends, the promise of life after life, of life eternal in God’s presence, is real. Generally, we understand to some degree that we will – at some point – after our earthly life is finished – arrive at a destination that is described by many varied interpretations of heaven. Much of what we think we know has been taught us through art, paintings, and writings from the middle ages and even up to recent times by television and movies given current interest in stories about a child’s description of heaven and first hand experiences of people who have died and have come back to life.⁶ N.T. Wright and other modern scholars think our concept of heaven is all wrong. Bishop Wright describes heaven as God’s realm but not some distantly remote galaxy hopelessly removed from human reality. In the ancient Judaic worldview, where our Christian church was formed, the two dimensions – our earthly life and our life after life – intersect and overlap so that the divine bleeds over into this world.⁷ This resonates with me because I believe that we are to bring about the Kingdom of God here in this life by cooperating with the divine presence of God in Christ.⁸ So we can have heaven right here on earth, though not as complete as in our life after our life on earth ends.

The books that chronicle the out of body experiences of those who have come back from death are most compelling because they are real.⁹ They are not fiction. I know, because I was bought back to life after a fall and traumatic brain injury. Now I do not know why this person comes back from death and not another. But I have heard from family members and friends and parishioners who have died and returned to life in this life because they perceived that they had work to do, work to do in the Kingdom of God here on earth.¹⁰ What people who have returned from death have shared with me and what I have read and what I myself experienced is of a God who is loving, accepting, and full of grace. For those who have had an out-of-body experience, a near-death experience, there is a calm, comforting, peace that can only be likened to being in the loving palm of the God’s hands. Life after life is a loving gift of God to us his most prized creation. We

were created out of an outpouring of love and that love never dies. Never! Love is... therefore love never ends. And life continues beyond the grave. Period! Full stop!

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ Is it serendipity or a coincidence – a God incident – or a God wink that our readings for this Sunday in the Year A lectionary affirm my personal theology on life and death. An angel of God spoke to Hagar and opened her eyes to see a well so that her and Abraham’s son Ishmael could be brought back from the brink of death. Paul reminded the Romans who believed in Christ that they were recipients of our Lord’s putting an end to death so that they – and we – might walk in newness of life. And today’s Gospel according to Matthew ends with the promise that those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will find it.

² Thanks to Jim Popham+ for his questions about who should be excluded from heaven.

³ Chris Witts on Steve Jobs and the Afterlife. See

<https://hope1032.com.au/stories/uncategorized/2015/steve-jobs-and-the-afterlife/>

⁴ Mona Simpson, “A Sister’s Eulogy for Steve Jobs” published in the New York Times Webarchive. I have a copy of the entire eulogy if anyone would like to read it.

⁵ See Romans 6:1b–11, today’s Epistle reading.

⁶ A cable television series entitled “Proof” addressed life after life but should be taken as entertainment rather than Gospel. And you may have read *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* or seen the movie by the same name. It is a sweet sweet story, but we need to remember that it shares the same author who wrote Sara Palin’s autobiography, so there may have been poetic licenses and exaggerations taken in the book and surely in the screenplay.

⁷ N.T. Wright after retiring as Bishop of Durham in the UK, now teaches early Christianity and New Testament at Scotland’s University of St. Andrews. He has addressed the issue of heaven and hell in a number of his books, but he has written *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, an 800+ page book devoted to the topic of the after-life.

⁸ See *God and Empire*, John Dominic Crossan, p. 197. “The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen *soon, violently, or literally*. The Second Coming of Christ is what will happen when we Christians finally accept the First Coming ... and start to cooperate with its divine presence.”

⁹ I recommend *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* by Dr. Eben Alexandrer which has been called “the most astounding [book] in more than four decades of studying this phenomenon... living proof of an afterlife.” Those accolades came from Dr. Raymond A. Moody, author of the 1970’s book *Life after Life*. But, if you are looking for some summer reading, I encourage you to read *Revealing Heaven: The Christian Case for Near-Death Experiences* by an Episcopal priest, the Rev. John W. Price who encourages people to share their experiences in the after-life –because they are gifts from God.

¹⁰ I also have had the privilege of being at the bedside of those who were dying, having fed many their last meal with “holy food,” and having prayed and sung those that I loved to death, I can tell you that the real stories of life after life told by the few who have returned are so very comforting to the dying.