

The Rev. Sharon A. Benton

November 25, 2007
Totenfest

Plymouth Congregational UCC

Return to Paradise
Luke 23:39-43

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

What does that mean to today's hearer?
... *with me in Paradise.*

I sense a deep discomfort in gathered bodies such as ours –
progressive religious folk –
when we are presented with discussions around
“what comes next”,
after death.

We don't tend to like talking about “next life” possibilities as a community.
We prefer to leave topics like this to our close conversational partner,
television
through the loving, if private, care of
“Touched by an Angel” reruns
or “Crossing over with John Edward”.

When I was younger, it was actor Michael Landon who helped usher my thoughts into otherworld dialogue with his post-Little-House-On-the-Prairie incarnation on the show “Highway to Heaven”.

Yet images of heaven have been so skewed as to become easily mocked by cartoon caricatures.
Put up any picture of pearly-type gates resting on a cloud,
with a haloed patriarch standing before them,
podium and book poised to admit or deny entrance –
and all of us recognize that *that's* supposed to represent heaven.

But there's more to our discomfort than mere disbelief in a cartoon.
Images of after-death are deeply intimate and personal.
One person's explanation of what happens to our essence or spirit after we die
will *never* suit *everyone's* understanding or hope.
In fact, what I hope for may never come close to satisfying you;
and your hope may leave me longing for something more.
If we dare to contemplate them, our understandings of the after-life can be as
personal to us as our experiences in *this* life.

And expressing the personal takes courage.

Taking a chance on speaking aloud our private thoughts on post-death possibilities
means that we become open to others' thoughts, their contributions.

We open ourselves to criticism if our framework for following logic or following feelings
doesn't fit our family's framework.

Or we find ourselves open to ridicule if our expectations stray too far from our neighbors'.
None of us wants to offer our most intimate selves to an uncertain reception.

And really, how can any single afterlife proposition be proven? It can't.
So we're left with speculation – and cartoon images of heaven and hell.

Some of us find no benefit in hypothesizing on the unfounded or unknowable.
So we become agnostic on the point.

And yet Paul urged the church to wonder.

In his writings, Paul is a great advocate for each of us getting to experience the fullness of Christ's gifts in our human condition – and this includes what comes next.

In one of his letters to the Corinthians, he wrote:

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ...

In other words, Christ offers so much more than *this life*. This life is only the first part.

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Again, each of us may have our own interpretation of what Paradise means.

Some may imagine a return to our source,
to God, whatever that looks like;

some see the images of today's Psalm:

“there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the Holy habitation of the Most High” –

or of John's Revelation:

“See, I am making all things new...

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

To the thirsty I will give water from the spring of the water of life”,
the new heaven, the new earth, the tree of life central;

and some may not picture anything at all,

but await a sense of peace that passes all understanding,

which often seems so elusive in this life.

What would be Paradise for you?

~~~

In late Jewish apocalyptic writings, Paradise referenced an end  
that was also a return to the beginning – the Alpha and the Omega.

Paradise (in both Hebrew and Greek) originally meant a garden,  
and in an early Greek version of biblical translation (Septuagint),  
the word Paradise was used to speak of the Garden of Eden itself.

In such an arid climate, a garden was a place of immense blessing.

The end, a return to the beginning.

New life within death.

Somehow, in speaking of death and after death,

it seems we would do well to bring our *brains* back to the beginning, also:

empty out all the stale images of the afterlife –

whatever they may look like in our individual minds.

Take them back to the beginning,

return to a Paradise where we can hold hope in a garden of plenty  
amid our culturally arid experiences of death.

~~~

I recognize that one of the dangers always present when focusing on God's realm as the *next life* is that of being neglectful of God's realm in *this life*.

Christ's offering of Paradise is in the here and now as well as by and by – I don't believe it must be one or the other.

We use different words to convey it –
 the Kingdom of God, or the Realm of God;
 the New Heaven and the New Earth –
 possibilities for peace and justice that we can work for in *this life*, in our place and in our time.
 Jesus said the Kingdom of God is among you (Luke 17:21),
 and this image of Paradise *is* possible as Christ working through us in the world.

It's an excellent theological point, with which I agree...

...But that's not what I'm talking about today.

That's the safe "out" of a difficult conversation.

As forward-looking, logical-minded Christians,
 we're comfortable with the justice work,
 with the peace work that Jesus championed.

We're comfortable with the parables pertaining to this life.

But the Gospels challenge us with more.

Can we dare to keep the topic here, once in a while?

What do progressive Christians have to say about these perennial, existential questions?

What happens after we die?

~~~

If you've ever attended a Christian funeral, you know this is one time when we  
 openly enter the after-death conversation *despite* our discomfort  
 at trying to name a universal truth that others simply don't experience as universal.

After all, how many of you have heard a funeral homily  
 that completely contradicted your concept of heaven?

I've heard *many*.

And still I find comfort in the familiar passage from John's Gospel often read at such times:

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to  
 prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2).

If it were not so...

For those of us who continue to wonder, I find comfort that at least the question is there.

If it were not so...

~~~

The first time that I spoke with an avowed atheist about death

I was working as a hospital chaplain and dealing with death on a semi-weekly basis.

I felt comfortable walking with people along the final steps of their journeys in this life,
 and talked with them about their hopes and their fears, their joys and sometimes sense of loss.
 Many of them said they'd never spoken about this.

And most often they *did* hold an expectation of something *good* to come,
 even if they couldn't define it.

And then this man, the atheist, told me flat out
 that his greatest hope was for nothing more than nothingness;
 that he feared anything else.

Yet, he had *no fear* when he held to his hope.

For me, his revelation was deeply shocking –
 not because he wished for nothing; but because it revealed to me the depth of my own hopes, my own faith.
 He had his hope, his expectation.
 I have mine.
 I imagine some of you have considered yours.

As Christians, if we give ourselves permission to open the particular gift faith offers –
 the gift of hoping in something, in God – then we also open ourselves to the possibility of no fear around death.

Recently I had the honor of witnessing the power that such hope provided in the life of one of our own at
 Plymouth.

Hoping in something that she believed helped make Pat Griffith's transition into death
 a truly moving experience for her family.
 At her funeral a couple weeks ago, I shared a story that Pat told me shortly before she died.

I offer the story to you now to try to convey some of the peace she had known:

About a year ago, Pat's long-time companion Harry died.
 In the period after Harry's death, Pat said,
 she once experienced the sense of a hand reaching toward her –
 comforting, loving, and very tangible –
 welcoming her into her own journey toward death.
 And she felt no fear.
 She said it was as if Harry, or some other beloved family member,
 were letting her know they were there. That they would be with her.

Pat also told me that she did not often speak of this – not many people do if they have such experiences.
 But this was part of the foundation for her great comfort and peace
 as she knowingly traveled her own path toward death.

Through her sharing that story, I believe Pat wanted others to know even a *portion* of such peace
 as she knew in her final days.

And she said it was because she *knew* what she hoped for. So she wasn't afraid.

~~~

Now, you don't have to subscribe to Pat's sense of re-connecting with loved ones on the other side.

Or you can.

You don't have to believe in pearly gates or angels.

Or you can.

You don't have to believe in nothingness or gardens or whatever else you've heard about what comes next ...

Or you can.

Today we celebrate Totenfest, remembering our loved ones who have died.

And the unspoken question is, what has happened to them?

And does that question frighten us, or does it bring us peace?

*And what do we do with such questions and our responses if we can't open to them in church?*

But the fact is:

we are here,  
 in this place on a Sunday morning,  
 worshipping God.

And we can speak the questions here.

This fact alone plants in us a seed of hope.

