

“Heaven Can’t Wait”

Date: May 10, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 John 3:1-3; John 14:1-14

Occasion: Easter 5, Year A

Themes: Heaven, Kingdom of God

I’d like to talk to you about heaven this morning. With all that’s going on with COVID-19, some of you might be thinking about heaven lately. I once heard a comedian joke by saying, “I noticed in music that there’s a *Highway to Hell* but only a *Stairway to Heaven*. Does that tell us something about the amount of traffic going in the wrong direction?” (Nod to AC/DC and Led Zeppelin)

Seriously, people *do* think about what happens after we die. Is there a heaven; what will it be like; and will we recognize our friends and family? Quite frankly, the Bible *doesn’t* tell us everything we might want to know about Heaven. But it tells us all that we *need* to know.

In our gospel lesson we hear this great promise from Jesus: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s house. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be where I am.”

Jesus promised us not just an afterlife, but a better life. Listen to these words from Revelation 21:4-5. In Heaven “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new! Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’” Did you hear that?

Jesus promises us not just an afterlife, but a *better* life. What will we look like? *That*, the Bible doesn't tell us. In our first lesson this morning, from 1 John 3:2, we read "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we shall be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him." An answer, but not *all* we want to know.

For those who are anxious about dying, Jesus offers us great comfort. He tells us that when we die, he will come to get us and he will take us to His Father's House. We know that when we see him, we shall be made like him. He offers us not just an afterlife, but a better life. Amen?

But how can we be sure Jesus will keep his pledge? Do we have any guarantee that his words are more than empty poetry or vain superstition? Dare we set our hopes and hearts in the hands of a small-town, Jewish carpenter? Well, the answer rests in a Jerusalem graveyard. If Jesus' tomb is empty, then his promises are not.

Leave it to the apostle Paul to put the question to rest. In 1 Corinthians 15, verse 23 he says, "There is an order to this resurrection. Christ was raised as the first fruit of the harvest; then, all who belong to Christ will be raised." Do you hear that? If Christ has been raised, then there is the promise that we too shall share in his resurrection. But how can we be sure?

Paul was writing to the Corinthian community, people who had been schooled in the Greek philosophy of a shadowy afterlife. Someone was trying to convince them that corpses couldn't be raised – not theirs nor Jesus'. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that he has at least 500 people who are willing to testify that they have seen Jesus, risen from the dead.

"You want witnesses? Fine, I can provide them Call them out, one by one. Let each person who saw the risen Christ say so. But you better pack

a lunch and clear your calendar, because more than 500 people are willing to speak up and testify.”

Do you see Paul’s logic? If one person claimed an encounter with a living Jesus after he was crucified on the cross, then disregard it. If a dozen people offered testimony, chalk it up to mob hysteria. But 50 people? A hundred people? Three hundred? When testimony expands into the hundreds, disbelief becomes belief.

Paul knew that not handfuls, but hundreds of eyewitnesses could testify if asked. Peter, James, John, the followers, the gathering of 500 disciples and Paul himself, they all saw Jesus. They saw him physically alive. They didn’t see a phantom or a ghost. They saw Jesus in the flesh. And when he appeared he assured them, “It is I, myself.”

Five hundred people left a testimony that we need to hear today. “It is safe to die.” Let me say it again, “It is safe to die.” So, let us live our lives without fear, and let us die with faith. Let us neither fear death, nor grieve unduly for those we love, because we know that one day, we will all be together again. Thanks be to God, who gives us victory, in Christ Jesus!

But wait a minute. You know, for many people the promise of heaven is so far off into the future that it holds no relevance for them today. Perhaps one day we might be able to cash in on the promise, claim the inheritance and slip off into the place called eternal life. But what about right now?

Well, *that* is also the promise of Easter, that heaven is not just a future place, but heaven is a new reality which Christ has begun here and now. Therefore, the future is now. Heaven isn’t just for when we die; heaven is breaking into our very lives, even as we live.

The future is happening today. When Christ rose on Easter day, he shattered the chains that bind us. Christ defeated Satan, whose strongest weapon is the fear of death. Jesus devastated his dominion, setting us free from everything that threatens to destroy us.

And so I want to say, Heaven cannot wait. The doorway to heaven has been opened. That doorway swings in both directions. It opens out, assuring us that we have a future after we die. But that doorway also opens in, so that the kingdom of God may come forth from Heaven into our lives today. We can't see the shape of who God is creating us to be, but the truth is, God left heaven, to be born of woman, so that we could be like God.

The kingdom came from over there, to be here. The foretaste of the heavenly promise is seen in Christ. By living in Him, we are made new. Listen, we can't wait until we die to start becoming good people. God left heaven so that we can be like Him, here and now.

What we shall be like *then* has not been revealed. But we know that we shall be like *him*. In the meantime, we let Christ live in us, breathe in us, and shape us into the people he wants us to be. In surrendering our lives to Christ, we allow him to shape us into the beautiful people that we are destined to be.

When Jesus was on earth, he spoke only occasionally about the coming life in heaven. But he spent a lot of time preaching about the kingdom of heaven now. In Matthew 4:17 Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe."

He was telling his followers that the kingdom was coming into their midst. They needed to turn, the literal meaning of the word *repent*. They needed to turn and participate in this coming of the reign of God. Heaven is

not just wishful thinking. Heaven is not just “pie in the sky in the great by and by.”

Heaven, according to Jesus, is the kingdom of God, coming into existence now. And we can choose to participate. What did Jesus mean when he referred to the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven? It is the rule of God, marked by love, compassion, justice and mercy. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus is telling us in the Lord’s Prayer that heaven is not just for the afterlife. Heaven can’t wait till we die. Heaven needs to start happening right here on earth. And it begins with you and me.

What am I trying to say? Just this – yes, we have the hope of heaven for when we die. Yes, we have the assurance that we will see our loved ones again. AND also this – heaven is trying to break into our world today and God needs our help to make it happen.

You and I participate in kingdom work. You and I are God’s hands and feet and voice in the world. You and I help to inaugurate the reign of God’s kingdom, based on love, compassion, justice and mercy.

We get to tell the good news: “Christ has overcome the grave. Be not afraid.” Therefore, do the work of the kingdom, even when it’s hard, even when it doesn’t seem to make a difference. Do the work of the kingdom even though it appears as though evil is winning the day.

Because, Christ has overcome the Enemy. Even if death should threaten us in our kingdom work, we know that we have the victory in Christ. Do I take precautions because of the coronavirus? You bet I do – as an act of love for my family and loved ones, and also for people I don’t even know. Am I afraid to die? I don’t want to, but I’m not afraid.

Heaven can't wait for us to become good people. God wants us and needs us to do the work of the kingdom here and now. The final victory belongs to Christ Jesus. When we shall see the fulfillment of his kingdom, no one knows. As we allow Christ to form himself in us, we see the picture more clearly. We see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall him face to face. Don't wait till you die to let heaven get into you. Heaven can't wait. Amen!