

## Past the Pearly Gates

John 14:1-6, 18-19, 27  
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It's an old joke. Two men, Ed and Steve, who are best friends and avid baseball players are separated when Ed dies in an accident. A couple of weeks later Ed, the man who died, appears to his best friend Steve. At first Steve can't believe it's really him, but finally he works up the courage to ask his friend what heaven's like. Ed tells him that there's good news and bad news. The good news is there *is* baseball in heaven. The bad news is... you're pitching for us on Friday.

What is heaven like? I asked that question in a new blog we've started this week called Wall Notes and got lots of responses. ([www.wallnotes.blogspot.com](http://www.wallnotes.blogspot.com))\* Joe Martelle wrote "I'm picturing a place where lilac and raspberries grow year round and I get to drive a 55 Chevy.." Others talked about meeting Jesus and seeing loved ones again, and about it being a place with no stress. One person said there'd be no internet. (Of course no internet connection would be hell for others!).

We don't talk about it too much. Just about the only time I ever hear about or speak about heaven is at a funeral. I suspect the reasons we don't talk about it more are for one, no one knows what heaven is really like, and for two, as a society we don't like death and we avoid talking about anything that has to do with death. Even when people die, we don't want to acknowledge death. Fewer and fewer people are having a funeral or memorial service. Sometimes people throw a party, but more and more people are doing absolutely nothing.

Personally, I think that is a shame. Funerals are so important and can be wonderful. Doug gets the sniffles at weddings (go to the church website and watch his sermon from last week, it was great!), and I get emotional at funerals. I suppose in a way that's not surprising. Funerals are often sad. It is very hard to say goodbye. Even if you believe in eternal life, it's hard to lose someone and know that you won't have that person physically around anymore to talk to or do things with. Even Jesus got emotional when his friend Lazarus died, and he was about to bring him back to life! Even if you are sure 'they are in a better place', you can't help but feel the sadness that comes with loss. But it's not just the sadness that makes me emotional. In my experience, sometimes even more than at weddings, I feel the love of God and the love between people tangibly and powerfully. There is something about being in that deep space that helps you see the light and feel the love even more than usual.

Most funerals are beautiful and a blessing. And, funerals really are for the living. Don't tell your family members that you don't want a funeral when you die because they really do help those left behind to get through the grief of losing you. It is a time when they can experience the genuine joy and the depth of love in the middle of the struggle. Funeral arrangements don't have to be fancy or expensive to honour that completely unique life and remind us that life is indeed eternal. I believe that Jesus is there in that space of grief. He knows the pain of loss and the pain of your loss. He rose from the dead on Sunday, but before he got there he experienced the physical pain of death and spiritual pain of rejection and loss on Friday.

I really do believe that life is eternal. I believe that who we really are never dies. I believe that we pass from life, through death into eternal life. I believe that eternal life and heaven are not really a special place or time; I believe they are all around us. If there is a special place and time it is what we are in now. For a very short period of time we are in this physical body and in this physical place. While one soul might not even live long enough to be born, spending his or her entire life inside the womb, and another live over 100 years, in the end, when you look through the eyes of eternity, both lives are really only a blink of an eye in one sense and both lives can be incredibly full in another. I believe that in the Kingdom of heaven, eternity, is our true home and that it is around us. While we are in this physical life it is difficult to feel it, but we do occasionally catch glimpses of the eternal. Think of when we're thankful in scarcity or feel peace in the storm or forgive in great hurt or, especially, when we love. The more we can be aware of and be connected to the presence of God all around us, the better.

In the gospels Jesus often talks about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. Notice that he doesn't use the future tense, as we do. He doesn't say the Kingdom of heaven *will be*. He doesn't talk about later; he talks about the present. The Kingdom of heaven *is* like a grain of mustard seed (Matthew 13:31). The Kingdom of heaven *is* like treasure hidden in a field... (Matthew 13:44) The Kingdom of heaven *is* at hand (Matthew 10:7). The Kingdom of God *is* in the midst of you. (Luke 17:21)

I believe that one day we will be free of all the constraints of this life. Free from arthritis, free from bills, and governments and complicated relationships. Free from all the things that drive us crazy, that cause us pain and worry and heartache.

I also believe that we meet our loved ones again. Who we really are, our souls, never die. Hebrews 12:1 says "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us". I've always had the sense from that verse of our loved ones who have gone on before us, and the saints of the past being present here with us, cheering us on while we press ahead in our life and in our calling. In this physical life sometimes we catch a glimpse of that person near, but way more I believe that when we pass from this life through death we

will know our loved ones again. This won't be in a physical or complicated way. Remember when Jesus is asked about the afterlife and he's asked what happens to the woman whose husband dies and she marries again and he dies and she marries again... whose husband will she be in the afterlife? Jesus replies, basically, it's not like that. But I believe we will recognize somehow the soul that never dies. Many people who have had near death experiences have reported having family members meet them.

This month's cover story of the *United Church Observer* magazine is about the after-life and near death experiences. You can read it online at [www.ucobserver.org](http://www.ucobserver.org). Near death experiences are fascinating. Alanna Mitchell in her article writes: "Between 10 and 20 percent of the resuscitated

report these near-death experiences and they're remarkably similar, regardless of the survivor's age, sex, nationality or religious background. Reports of these extraordinarily similar experiences stretch back through culture, time and the written human record."

This summer at a Presbyterian Church camp that my family and I attended, I met a woman named Christine who told me about her near death experience. Christine is an E.R. doctor and she was volunteering as a rather overqualified "camp nurse". Her near death experience happened when she was a young adult, while she was volunteering in Africa. It was a malarial infection that somehow neither she nor her leaders recognized the severity of it until it was nearly too late. Shortly before the truck arrived to get her to a hospital, Christine slipped away. She told me that she knew she was dead. She also said that her life – the significant character shaping events of her life—flashed before her. But the overwhelming feeling was that she was really home. She said it was difficult to put in words but it was the most wonderful and amazing place filled with love and light and she didn't want to leave. Though Christine did not die, (or stay dead), it was a very close call according to the doctors. When she woke up, she remembers thinking to herself "You've got to be kidding!" and she was initially annoyed to find herself alive. She didn't want to be alive after what she had experienced; she just wanted to be back where she had been. Now of course she is glad that she did not die then because of the sons she went on to have, as well as so many meaningful experiences that life brings. That experience in many ways shaped her life. She knows there is a loving God and life after death. She understands people being afraid of the process of death, but not the outcome. She is happy to be alive, but can't wait for her time to go back to that place that is truly home. Her experience sounds like so many other stories I have heard or read about and it resonates with what I believe.

Let me tell you another story. But before I tell the story I have to back up to last week. Do you remember Stewart's children's story? Stewart was talking about meaningful words and as an example he asked the kids if their mothers had a special name for them. He shared that his mother had a special pet name for him, but that no one else apart from his sister and his wife (and of course his parents) ever knew that name. Well after the children shared, one well spoken girl lifted up her hand and said something like "We shared the special names our mothers had for us. I think you should tell us your special name." In that moment Stewart felt prompted to share this special name. And it shows his great love and respect for the children of this church that he did. He said his special name is Butch, and he told the children that no one was allowed to call him that because it was just his mother's name for him. Now I'm going to tell you a story in Stewart's words, as he shared it with me in an email this week.

*"My mother died last May, and the next night my daughter had a dream. Jeannette dreamt that she was walking hand in hand with her grandmother on a beautiful beach at sunset. In the dream it seemed to her that she was about 5 years old and Grammie was maybe about 30. My daughter goes on to describe what Grammie was wearing and how beautiful she looked and how warm and loved she felt and many other details. But just before the dream ended my mother said to Jeannette: 'Tell Butch that heaven is just what we thought it would be'.*

*"Now the interesting thing is that Jeannette did not know that "Butch" was the special name my Mother called me. In fact, until last Sunday's Kid's Time, only my Dad, Lily Jean and my sister knew that. It had quite an impact on all of us.*

*"And what is heaven like for Mom and me? It is warm, loving, accepting, beautiful, peaceful, belonging, healing, with nature at its richest, family and friends united, the Father-Mother God embracing us close, it is this life extended but in perfection, it is peace and wholeness, all is forgiven, and all is healed...this is not something I believe, this is something I know. And now I know that Mom and I were right!"*

One of the people who has shaped my understanding or theology around death and the afterlife is C.S. Lewis. Lewis is best known for his books "The Chronicles of Narnia". This series begins with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and ends with *The Last Battle*. The stories follow three groups of children who are from time to time transported to the magical land of Narnia, and then returned back to their own world, in England. In *The Last Battle*, at the end of the book all the Narnia children, some of whom have since grown up, plan to meet at a railway station in England. Some are on the train, the others waiting on the platform. Approaching the station, the train rounds the bend too quickly. They all hear a tremendous noise and then they find themselves again in Narnia -- but this time it is a Narnia transformed, far more beautiful than they had ever seen it before. Here they come face to face with Aslan, the lion, who symbolizes Jesus. Reading from the book:

*Aslan turned to them and said: "You do not yet look as happy as I mean you to be." Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often." "No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?" Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. "There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "All of you are --- as you used to call it in the Shadowlands --- dead. The [school] term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."*

If eternity is our home, what's the point of life? I believe we are here to love and to learn how to love and to be loved. We all have obstacles that keep us from feeling and giving God's love (that's next week's message), but regardless of the obstacles, we are called to love. Always as we love we do feel the kingdom of heaven—eternity—really is in our midst. I Corinthians 13 is a familiar passage most associated with weddings, but it fits just as well if not better as we speak of life and death and life beyond death. Let me close with the last part of that scripture as interpreted by the Message version of the Bible.

*Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be cancelled.*

*When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.*

*We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!*

*But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love. (I Cor 13:8-13)*

Let us pray....