

We read it in Scripture. We recite it in our creeds. We even sing it in our hymnody. Yet how many of us acknowledge it, the brute fact that when you die, you die? You don't look down on your loved ones from heaven; if you could see, you would look up at the feet of those who tread across your grave.

The stark reality of death understandably makes some of us gasp. It compels us to seek a way out, to deny the summons that inevitably comes to us all. Of course, as the old saying goes, nobody gets out alive. Yet rarely does that prevent us from talking as if life simply continues. Our belief in heaven confirms it, even though none of us truly knows what dreams, if any, may come.

"What we [do] know," writes the theologian Rosemary Ruether, "is that death is the cessation of the life process that holds our organism together. Consciousness ceases and the organism itself gradually disintegrates. This consciousness is the interiority of that life process that holds the organism together. There is no reason to think of the two as separable, in the sense that one can exist without the other" (*Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 257).

Ruether's point rings loudly in our ears: you cannot simply extract the soul from the body; the two belong together; when one dies, so dies the other.

My Experience at Funerals

When I preach from the pulpit at funerals, I certainly would not turn to Ruether for consolation! Instead, I proclaim the promise from Scripture that God will ultimately destroy death and wipe away our tears (Revelation 21:4). With Paul, I declare that "love never ends" (1

Corinthians 13:7), and that nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love God has for us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). I say these things without referring to heaven, the reason for which I will explain momentarily.

Upon leaving the shelter of the sanctuary to perform the final commendation of the deceased to God at their grave, however, something changes. The stark finality of that person's life confronts when we lower the coffin into the ground. Reading Scripture, I hear now how feeble my voice sounds as the wind carries it away or as the rain draws it down into the dark, damp, and lonely recesses of the earth.

I feel cold.

Here Ecclesiastes speaks to me more than Paul. "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same," its author writes. "They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth" (3:19-21)?

"Who knows?" I ask myself in concert with the Bible's greatest skeptic. "Who knows what happens after we die? Who knows what dreams may come?"

It Never Fails

My agnosticism concerning life after death almost always gets challenged when I conduct a memorial service. The pattern is constant: a friend or member of the family, typically someone unaffiliated with the congregation, comes to the lectern, speaks meaningfully about his or her relationship to the deceased, only to conclude by saying, "I just believe [insert name here] is looking down on us right now, smiling and doing what s/he always loved [insert hobby here]." The speaker then

chuckles, as do some of those listening, yet something about it always strikes me as uneasy, as if we all know the secret: the person we are remembering has ceased to be. A joke about heaven breaks the tension for a moment, but underneath it all resides what the theologian Paul Tillich calls “the shock of nonbeing.”

To put the experience in plainer terms: who can deny how *unbelievable* it feels when the life of someone we love has ended?

Scripture and Death

One thing I deeply appreciate about the Bible is how seriously its authors take death. You can probably imagine why: war, disease, famine, and persecution posed a constant threat to Jews and early Christians alike. Death made no distinction between culture, country, or creed. A man living in the Roman Empire during the first century had an average life-expectancy of merely 28 years (Gawande, *Being Mortal*).

We should not be surprised, therefore, when Paul refers to the “sting of death” (see 1 Corinthians 15:55) or when James compares his listeners to “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14). Life without medical intervention, proper hygiene, or diplomacy between nations meant that death, like sin, was constantly “lurking at the door” (Genesis 4:7).

The good news according to Paul was that God had done something about it. The power of sin and death entered the world through Adam, he says, but God’s love has freed from their grip through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:12). He has become what the author of Hebrews 2:10 calls “the pioneer of [our] salvation,” the Good Shepherd who leads us through the narrow gate of death into the life of the world to come.

Make no mistake, however. Death is real for Paul. When we die, our bodily functions as well as our consciousness (or soul) cease. “But how

can that be?" you ask. "I thought the Bible teaches that we go to heaven after we die. I mean, Jesus himself promises the repentant thief on the cross that 'today' he will join him in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Paul's answer appears in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, our second reading for today. After pointing out that Christ truly "died and was buried" (v. 3), he refers to those in Christ who have likewise succumbed to death by saying euphemistically that they have "fallen asleep" (v. 6). In other words, they lack awareness. Their mental functions have stopped, at least temporarily.

The equation of death with sleep occurs throughout Scripture. When King Saul has a medium bring back Samuel from Sheol, the abode of the dead, the prophet asks, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up" (1 Samuel 28:15)? He was resting, sleeping in shades of the underworld.

Fast-forward to 2 Peter near the end of the New Testament, and its author says the same thing: "For ever since our ancestors have fallen asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (3:4). When you die, you sleep. This is why we still say "rest in peace." There is, however, a caveat.

While awareness of the world around us has ceased *temporarily*, the hour comes when we awaken to the light of a new day. "Listen," Paul proclaims, assuming the resurrection will occur in his lifetime, "I will tell you a mystery! We will not all fall asleep, but we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Why? Because what has happened to Christ will happen to each of us! The resurrection makes him what Paul elsewhere calls the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep," that is, the first fruits of God's new creation (1 Corinthians 15:20).

We, too, will die. Yet on the last day, when God's presence fills all things to such a degree that God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians

15:28), we will be raised. Death has lost its sting. It will not have the last word. "For us Christ lived," declares the author of a classic hymn, "for us he died, and conquered in the strife. Awake, arise, go forth in faith, and Christ shall give you life" (ELW 452, "Awake, O Sleeper, Rise from Death.")

Another Funeral

Martin Luther had five children, two of whom died before maturity. One of these was his beloved Magdalena. At 13 she succumbed to illness. It broke Luther to pieces. At the funeral, we are told, he stood up and with boldness through his tears shouted, "There will be a resurrection!" He said nothing about Magdalena's soul being in heaven, for he knew that if our souls were *already* immortal, how could Christ save us from death?

Luther also knew Scripture and he knew his creed. We say it every Sunday: "I believe in the *resurrection of the body*, and the life everlasting."

Luther leaves us with a story. When the last day of the old creation arrives, he says, the Spirit will come to me and whisper, "Martin, it's time to get up." As with ordinary sleep, he would know nothing of time and its duration, even if millions of years passed. He rests. But then, in the twinkling of an eye, he will wake up as part of the new creation. This was the promise to which Luther clung, both for himself and for those whom he loved.

According to Scripture and the historic creeds, this likewise is God's promise to *you*.

Ruether was right, at least according to the faith. Death is truly "the cessation of the life process that holds our organism together." Souls do not fly away at death and look down upon us from heaven. They rest

with the body, as it were. They sleep. They are, to use a different metaphor, seeds in the ground awaiting God's new creation.

Imagine it. The Spirit comes to you after eons of sleep, taps you lightly on the shoulder, and says to you, "It's time to wake up." You open your eyes as your loved ones come into focus. You have been transformed. You no longer see "through the glass darkly," as Paul says; you see and know in full (1 Corinthians 13:9). You are complete, the fulfillment of what God originally intended in the creation of the world.

What Dreams May Come

I have never found the idea that somewhere after I die my disembodied soul will linger eternally among the angels in clouds.

The concept is Greek, not Judeo-Christian. When speaking to a Greek audience, writers like Luke flirted with the idea, which eventually crept in to mainstream Christianity and today serves as the dominant view of what happens when our lives end.

The resurrection, on the other hand, sounds strange to me. "Who knows?" I wonder. "Who knows what happens after we die? Who knows what dreams may come?"

But then I think of how I will face death, and suddenly a wave of comfort flows through me. I will go to sleep. But someday, our faith tells me, God will awaken me to something completely new. I will have had no experience of time or its passing, nor will time as I understand it apply.

"Dan," a voice in my ear whispers, "it's time to wake up."

Amen.