

I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting

Since the beginning of time humans have been interested in life after death. Some cultures like the Egyptians engaged in elaborate rituals to help their dead move on to the next stage of existence. **The huge pyramids of Egypt** give us an idea of how important this was to them. Inside these super structures reaching high into the sky was a space for a sarcophagus inside of which a casket was place for the bodies of their leaders draped in gold fabric in preparation for another existence. I am not sure where this left the rest of the citizens but maybe it was a dramatization for all as to what was going to happen.

As a whole we, of this 21st century, fear and deny death, yet are obsessed with it. We cannot tolerate the mystery of what happens when our bodies cease to function; so, we develop preoccupations with near death encounters in which we float over and above our bodies and surroundings and toward a bright light at the end, reviewing life in accomplishments and relationships and determining to return and complete an unfinished task and behaving in a more loving way. Popular books about this interaction are purchased by people who wait in long lines to get autographed copies from the author. In fact one bookstore reported its longest line ever at such a book signing. Also TV shows projecting interactions of angels in human affairs especially dealing with death are long running and readily watched. Usually the angels prompt people to lovingly deal with themselves, one another and others around them who may be dying. These all indicate our human interest and need to believe in life after death.

Some today have slipped into another even more radical approach to dying and life after death in which health care professionals fight off death as a war that is waged with all resources possible. Death is considered a failure and life after death is considered only after all else has failed. Hospice provides a more inclusive form of nursing and medical care. But it seems to me that something is still missing in our society's formula for life and death. What is it? In the Apostle's Creed which we have been hearing about for the past eight weeks we have these concluding words: **I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting.**

I don't mind saying that preparing to speak on this, the last article of the Apostles Creed, has been one of the most challenging responsibilities I have ever been asked to fulfill. In preparation for this message I have asked people about their belief in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting and have gotten many different answers. I have talked with university presidents, medical doctors, nurses, religious leaders, pastors, parishners and derived no consensus but have heard thought provoking, searching, honest, physically and spiritually provocative responses. It has been an exciting exploration and I would like to share with you what I have learned and what I believe. Mind you I have not died so I do not really know for sure the answers but this is what I believe. I share this with you because I believe it may be helpful. I hope and pray it is....so lets pray and begin.

The earliest record of the Apostles Creed was in a letter written from Milan to Pope Siricius in 390 AD. It was much simpler and shorter then than today. Tradition tells us that each of the twelve disciples wrote one of the articles which seem to be based upon

the scriptures. Additions and adjustments in wording and content were made for about 700 years. We of course are not exactly sure how each article evolved into the form in which we have it today but it at least gives us a starting place. Once again, the article for today, which is the last one on which we will be speaking in this series, is the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting. Here is what I believe...

First of all, I need to confess that I am not overly concerned with the past and the future because **I Believe in the Eternal Now** and my explanation of this may help you to understand a connection between my belief in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Here is what I mean.

When I was a young man having graduated from college and seminary I continued my education by participating in six more years of behavior sciences and human relations. I did this not to get more education and degrees but to learn to be able to connect with god, myself, those around me and others. I shall never forget one of the first things I was asked to do to help me to personally identify who I thought I was. I was asked to draw a picture of myself on a big blank sheet of paper, about three feet wide and six feet long. I drew a picture of myself wearing a white sport shirt and blue, white checkered pants and a white belt. I probably had on white shoes too! I adorned my picture with lots of hair and a big smile on my face. Back then I did not have a beard but I may have sported a mustache. It was like a Facebook picture in my life and development. And I thought I was handsome. No, I am not showing that picture this morning. But there was something very disturbing about this picture.

I noticed that I was wearing a big black wrist watch, big enough to include count down, stop watch and alarm functions. I used it for racing sail boats as well as my appointments. I wondered the reason it was so important for me to include the wristwatch in my picture. I had somehow been conditioned to perform what was expected of me and what I felt I needed to accomplish in a very timely manner. I had apparently taken seriously my father's instruction to cultivate a large field of watermelons, cantaloupes, tomatoes, cucumbers or sweet corn and then drive the tractor home. I was driven to get a job done in a certain amount of time. My father was never abusive or unreasonable but somehow I got the idea that I had to work until I finished the job. I remember our oldest daughter asking me one day if I disliked being at home with our family. I asked her if there were a reason she asked, and she responded, "You are never home."

It was about then that I read these words in the Hebrew Scriptures, **"A thousand years in God's sight are but a day that has just gone by"** (Psalm 90:4). My God had been too small. As a sailor I realized that Greenwich Time was important to help me determine where I was on the face of the earth. And I also realized that ancient people like the Mayans had connected themselves with one another by building their communities in accordance with planets in the universe but I also believed there must be another way of looking at time that might help connect me with god, myself, people around me and others. As important as chronological time was and however it was being measured, I began to realize that there must be another way. It might even go so far as to connect me with the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

It was then that I discovered ontological time, the in-depth connection of being totally present. Incidentally, on my Walk to Emmaus I and the other pilgrims were asked to take off our watches and not put them back on until the weekend was over. It was really freeing. I began to realize that there were times like in the Bible when it reads, **“the sun stopped in the middle of the sky” (Joshua 10:12-14)**. Time too precious to be measured chronologically is valued ontologically. Sometimes the sun just stands still. I learned that at least 27 philosophers including Plato, Sartre and in more recent years, Whitehead, thought of time ontologically. And I realized in reading the New Testament that my Master, Jesus focused on the eternal now with everyone. **“He even noticed while in a crowd a woman, who touched the hem of his garment” (Matthew 9:19-21)**. An old adage explains the eternal now pretty well for me. Maybe it will help you. It goes like this: “Yesterday is a canceled check; tomorrow is a promissory note; today is the only cash you have.” So, I try to live and certainly believe in the eternal now! For now is the hour of our salvation.

Secondly, **I Believe in Amazing Grace**. Without a doubt one of the most popular hymns of Christendom is John Newton’s Amazing Grace. He was born in 1725 in England. His mother a tender and caring woman died when he was six. He never doubted his seafaring father’s love for him but was driven to distraction by his unreasonable demands. He was forced to serve as a child aboard ships and as a mature but desperate seaman aboard a slave trader was given food by the slaves to help him avoid starvation. In retrospect after he had helped the ship weather a life threatening storm, he remembered his prayer in which he asked God to have mercy, began to read the Bible and write his thoughts. His life began to change and he was promoted to be a captain and was married. His life was altered dramatically by reflection on his experiences at sea, especially with the slave trade, and he began training to be ordained to serve in the Church of England, and was appointed to be the pastor of two churches for over forty years. His popularity drew many to the churches, his hymn writing was astounding. He wrote one hymn a week, over 600, Amazing Grace became the most popular. William Wilberforce whom you may remember from the film “Amazing Grace” was spurred on by the inspiration of John Newton to work for 47 years for England’s abolition of the slave trade. John Newton’s Amazing Grace seems to encompass for me and many others things that I can not understand but believe including the resurrection and life eternal even from our most terrible situations and circumstances.

One of my friend’s right here in this community of faith who is no longer able to get out to worship helped me to understand this recently. He told me that not wanting to just sit and stare at the wall in his older age he decided to start thinking about heaven. He said that he decided that heaven must be a perfect space because Jesus said he was going to go and prepare a place for us so that where he was we might be also. It was going to be perfect because there would be room for all of us. He further explained that he did not know where it was or how he would get there but he believed that if God took care of us in this world, God would certainly provide for and take care for us in the world to come. For him it was simply a matter of trust and he trusts God. My friend pretty much sums up the way I feel too! He is not worried about heaven.

There are of course some who have a need to know more about heaven. In fact, Matthew gives us a record of Sadducees coming to Jesus saying, “there is no resurrection.” They quoted Moses saying that if a man dies his brother shall marry his wife. If there are seven brothers, and they all die and last of all the woman herself dies, in the resurrection whose wife of the seven will she be? Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. **For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matthew 22: 30).** And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” From Jesus’ response we may see that heaven is even bigger and more inclusive than we ever imagined. It may be beyond our wildest dreams or imagination. In fact, the resurrected body referred to in The Apostles Creed may be more realistically referring to a spiritual resurrection of the body of all people who believe in God like the Church itself. It is amazing grace and I might not understand it but I believe it.

Thirdly, **I Believe Hope Springs Forth.** In Faith Link, one of our many adult classes here at Elkton United Methodist Church, a recent lively discussion based on The Promise of Resurrection ensued after being introduced by the class’ infamous leader, Rick Ceresini ensued. In fact the class instructed the leader to check with our lead pastor Karen about some pertinent information. He was told not to worry that it would all be taken care of on August 29th when Don preached. Well, the 29th is here and so am I and I am sharing with you my beliefs regarding the last article found in The Apostles Creed. But how can this be? I imagine you may still be struggling. I know I am. Thus far you have heard that I believe in The Eternal Now and Amazing Grace, and now I am adding one more important belief, Hope Springs Forth.

Recently, when negative email rumors were running rampant like they do especially about politicians whether republican or democrat, Michael D. Shear of The Washington Post wrote an article titled, Obama’s Christianity is Important to Him, but not for Political Show in which he quoted information given reporters about his initiated contacts for prayer with three leading Christian pastors. He also quoted our president saying to a crowd of Christian leaders at the Easter Prayer Breakfast, “we are awed by the grace *Jesus* showed even to those who would have killed him” and he went on to say, **“We are thankful for the sacrifice he gave for the sins of humanity. And we glory in the promise of redemption in the resurrection.”** These important words are inspiring especially coming from our president but I wanted to hear more even more from other sources.

In our scripture lesson this morning (I Corinthians 15:51-57) we heard the Apostle Paul proclaim resurrection for all believers of Christ. His claims are grounded not in wishful thinking but in sure confidence of future reality that caused the disciples then and us now to wait in eager longing and unfettered imagination to discover where God is already at work in the world and join with God in that transformation. I know that this is oftentimes difficult and challenging to believe and act upon in faith but never-the-less true. Here are his words written to the Romans, **“We groan inwardly while we wait for our adoption,**

the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8: 23-25). But if this is not enough let us turn to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself to discover what he has said to help us.

Diane is our gospel reader this morning so she is going reading these beatitudes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter five in the first ten verses. **(Diane takes over)**

“Blessed are...

...the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

...the pure in heart, for they will see God”

...those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake for theirs is the

Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5: 3-10).

And here are here are some words from the gospel of John. **(Diane invites the congregation to read with her the following two).**

“For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“The water that I will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4: 13-14).

And here are resurrection accounts from all four of the Gospels **(Diane finishes with these herself).**

The Resurrection of Jesus is recorded in Matthew 28: 9-10, 16-20

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene in Mark 16: 7, 9-12

The Walk to Emmaus is in Luke 24: 13-53

And Jesus Appears to Mary and the Disciples in John 20: 11-23, 26-30 & 21: 1-22

These gospel accounts are good news to our ears. They represent Jesus’ response to our human need. When we lose hope we are finished. Even when we are facing life’s most difficult situation – death itself, we still have hope. It springs forth from within us. Jesus is living testimony to this throughout his life, death and in his resurrection. Trust him, trust god in him. Trust god in you. Trust god in those around you and even in others. Do not trust those who would rob you of this eternal hope. It is god’s gift to you and no one can take it away, not even with a knife to your throat, a sword to your side or death on a cross. Hope springs forth.

Recently, I was spending a brief time hidden away in a fast food restaurant, as I typically do, over a dollar-lunch special; a ring came over my cell. It was a woman telling me that her husband was near death, asking me if I could come right away. I went quickly and met her in the front yard; she escorted me to her husband’s bedside where I met their sons. It was the first time I had met any of them even though they have been attending worship here. We talked and shared many stories and then prayed in a circle around her husband’s bed. He could hear us but was too weak to respond. It was comforting to him and all of us to affirm our belief in the resurrection and life in the world to come. In about a half hour after I left one of the sons phoned to tell me that his father had just died. There was sadness and grief in losing his father but astounding and unmistakable hope in

the promises of Jesus regarding the resurrection and eternal life. The transition was made in sure and certain hope. Some days later I was privileged to begin the service celebrating his death and resurrection with Jesus' words, **'I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die'** (Matthew 11: 215-26). Hope Springs Forth not only for the David B. Betts family but for every person and family here today as well as the entire family of God.

In conclusion, I invite you to **Believe in the Eternal Now, Amazing Grace and Hope that Springs Forth** by standing and singing, "Because He Lives."