

March 3, 2019

We Believe

We Believe in Heaven

John 14:1-6

Opening words: Let us begin by reciting the words of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church, (*universal)
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Today, I conclude my sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, *We Believe*. The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles. However, it contains the teachings of the apostles. The Apostles' Creed is important for three reasons. First, the Apostles' Creed tells the world what we believe. That is important because our world is getting smaller. Non-Christians want to know what we believe. Second, the Apostles' Creed reminds us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, of our core beliefs. Being a good person is not good enough. Christian theology is clear and structured. Third, the Apostles' Creed reminds us that we stand with the church throughout the ages. Ours is not the first generation to recite these words. The Apostles' Creed is a historical document, which came to us from the first and second centuries. We stand with the saints of the past. Each phrase of the Apostles' Creed is grounded in scripture. To date, we have looked at the Apostles' understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the forgiveness of sins. Today's topic is heaven.

Christianity is not the only faith that believes in an afterlife. Every world religion handles death in a different way. The afterlife in the Buddhist faith is called nirvana, or eternal rest. In this state there is no physical or spiritual pain. The afterlife in Islam is called paradise. It is a place of joy, pleasure and rest. In Zoroastrianism, the afterlife consists of three levels. Each level has varying degrees of individualism and variety. In the

Hebrew faith, the afterlife exists, but it is not defined. Hindus believe in reincarnation. The life you are born into is a reward or a punishment of your previous life. Our scripture reading for today is John 14:1-6. Let me call this message *We Believe in Heaven*.

John 14:1-6 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Jesus answered him, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

William Barclay (1907-1978) was a Scottish Bible scholar, who taught at the University of Glasgow. He once said, "*For the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is. We do not need to speculate on what heaven will be like. It is enough to know that we will be forever with him.*" If you would like to go to heaven, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the fourteenth chapter of John. It is late in Jesus' earthly ministry. He uttered these words as he ate that last supper with the disciples. The crowd from Palm Sunday has gone home. The fig tree has been cursed. The lessons in the temple courts have been completed. It is crunch time, and the disciples can't ignore the truth. The end is near, and Jesus is going to be leaving them. The disciples are upset, and Jesus tries to comfort them. However, this is the miracle: The words meant to comfort the disciples many years ago comfort us today. What is the topic that is comforting to everyone? Jesus talks about heaven and tells them there are many rooms in heaven. That is a good thing, because everyone wants to go to heaven. Do you know of anyone who doesn't want to go to heaven? Let me state the obvious.

Our world has always been fascinated with the afterlife. Ours is not the first generation. You can also find that fascination in the Bible. Do you remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)? In this world, they lived at the opposite ends of life. The rich man had everything; the poor man, Lazarus, had nothing. The tables are turned in the afterlife. Lazarus is taken to be with Abraham, and the rich man goes to hell. It is a story about punishment and reward in the afterlife. It is a story that reminds us that every generation has been fascinated with the afterlife. It is important that you know that the story of the rich man and Lazarus is not a parable. In parables, the characters aren't named. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is simply a story. It is a simple story that is not just isolated to the Bible. It is a traditional story that is found in various forms in several cultures and sacred writings. That fact underscores the point that our world has always been fascinated with the afterlife, and our generation is no exception. Our world is still fascinated with the afterlife. How many afterlife stories have you heard?

Have you heard Don Piper's story? On January 18, 1989, Don Piper, a Baptist minister, was on his way home from a conference in Texas. He was crossing a bridge in his Ford Taurus, when he was struck by a semi. When the paramedics arrived, there was no sign of life and they covered him with a tarp. The medical examiner was called, and another minister who happened by prayed over his lifeless body. It is during that time, Piper says he went to heaven. He said, heaven was both amazing and beautiful. He met his great grandparents and joined a heavenly choir. He was gone for 90 minutes and when he returned, he began to tell his story. To date, he has told the story of his time in heaven to 3,000 different audiences, written a book and made a movie. It is estimated that more than 1.5 million people have heard his story. Do you believe Don Piper went to heaven for 90 minutes? We are fascinated with his story because we are fascinated with the afterlife.

Have you heard Colton Burpo's story? When he was three years old, he had an emergency appendectomy. Three months later, he began to tell people that during the operation, he went to heaven. Colton began to describe events and people that seemed impossible for him to know about. He met his unborn miscarried sister and his great-grandfather who had died thirty years earlier. He said, Jesus visited him on a rainbow-colored horse. He said he sat in Jesus's lap and Jesus comforted him, as angels sang to him. He saw Mary kneeling before the throne of God. He told everyone, heaven is for real. Do you believe Colton went to heaven? We are fascinated with his story because we are fascinated with the afterlife.

Do you know of anyone who has an afterlife story? I do. When I served in the old St. Clairsville District, I had a parishioner by the name of Lois Barr. She was a wonderful person, who was a veteran nurse. When I met her, she was teaching nursing at a branch of Ohio University. Most of her experience came from a local emergency room. She would tell you, she had seen many die through the years. There is never a violent ending; it is a calming moment. One night, a man came in who had suffered a heart-attack. They did all they could do to save him, but he was gone. They kept working on him for several minutes, when suddenly his heart started beating again. In time, he opened his eyes and asked one question: "Why?" "Why did you bring me back here? Heaven was so beautiful." People loved hearing Lois's story because people are fascinated with the afterlife.

The topic of heaven is fascinating to Americans. This is the problem: Americans are fascinated with heaven, but we don't know what the Bible teaches about heaven and how to get there. According to a 2014 Pew Research Group study, 74% of all Americans believe in the existence of heaven. The same study tells us, only 39% of Americans believe in the existence of hell. This is the saddest statistic: 54% of Americans believe good works are part of the formula for salvation. If that is the case, Jesus died in vain on the cross, because it is simply not true. Jesus is our only hope of experiencing heaven. Jesus is our only hope of salvation. Go back to the scripture one more time with me.

We are in the fourteenth chapter of John. Jesus is in the Upper Room with the disciples. The end is near. In a short time, Jesus will be arrested, tried twice and be placed on the cross to die. The Master did die, and he was placed in a tomb. Nothing happened on Saturday, but everything happened on Sunday. A few women made a discovery that changed our world. Jesus miraculously came back to life, proving to the world that he had defeated death. The resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith. Either you believe in the resurrection, or you don't. The Apostle Paul understood the significance of the resurrection. Romans 10:9 says, *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Perhaps, Jesus said it clearer in our Gospel lesson. Jesus said of himself, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me.*" In other words, without Jesus, your entrance into heaven is only a dream. Without Jesus, there is no salvation.

Several years ago, I was called by a local funeral home to officiate at a service for a man who had lived in the area. They called me because the man didn't have a church home. As is my custom, I went to the calling hours the night before the service to meet the family. The man was single and left behind six children; three daughters and three sons. It was painful for them to sit there with me. The men sat on my left and the women sat on my right. For a couple of minutes we made small talk. Then, I made my move. I asked them the most generic of questions: Tell me something about your dad? On cue, they went silent and stared at their shoes. We sat there in silence for a minute, then one of the daughters looked at me and said, "There is one thing we know for sure, Dad is in heaven." One of her brothers fired back, "If he is in heaven, then I don't want to go. I never want to see him again" They all looked at me, and I said, "When it comes to the afterlife, there are only two options."

Is there anyone here today who doesn't want to go to heaven? The answer is no, because everyone wants to go to heaven. This is the truth: No one enters heaven without Jesus. Do you remember what William Barclay said? He said, *"For the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is. We do not need to speculate on what heaven will be like. It is enough to know that we will forever be with him."* If you would like to go to heaven, say, **"Amen!"**