

2 Corinthians 4:7-17 ~ John 14:1-7

Preaching on Your Good Questions: A Three-Sermon Summer Series

*What is Heaven Like and Who Gets In?* (1<sup>st</sup> of 3)

11<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost ~ Profession of Faith (Confirmation) ~ Communion ~ August 4, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

### *Introduction to Series*

During a sermon I preached one Sunday back in March, I invited you to write down questions you have about God that were on your hearts. Questions you wished I might preach about one day. We happened to have a long blue insert in your bulletins soliciting your suggestions for Elders and Deacons that was blank on the back, plenty of space to spill those questions. And you did! Plenty of excellent questions. So now, in the middle of this hot, humid, rainy summer (have you ever mowed so many times in July before?), your wait is over. Game on: Here we go, beginning today.

Curiously, all of your questions related to three topics: heaven, evil, and forgiveness. Jesus must have been reading your minds the day he gave us what we call "The Lord's Prayer." (He is clever that way, time and space traveler that he is.) Think about it for a moment: Heaven, evil, and forgiveness feature front and center throughout this beloved prayer. For today we are starting with heaven. Notice too, later in the service when we say the Apostles' Creed together, that it too, begins and ends with talk of heaven and eternal life. I will preach on "evil" and "forgiveness" the other two Sundays in this series. Today we get to consider this one: "What is heaven like, and who gets in?"

Let's listen to one of the many times Jesus speaks of heaven from the beginning of John 14. Words Jesus spoke to his disciples at a moment when their hearts must have been pounding out of their chests. The scene is the upper room, Judas had just left to betray him, after which Jesus warned Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock would crow the very next day. You can imagine that the disciples were surely freaking out at this moment. And Jesus knew his time on earth with his besties was running out.

### *Communion Meditation*

**What is heaven like?** Let's start with that question first. I'm sure you have heard descriptions of heaven that involve harps and clouds and streets of gold with everybody dressed in white robes. Throw in some trumpets and trombones. And something near zero gravity. Have you ever wondered what we would do all day in these robes? (Not so easy to play trombones or to swim in.) When we think about heaven, we hope you will get to be with your loved ones, somehow. Some may wonder whether there will be dogs there. What *will* heaven be like? As Rob Bell, wrote in his book, *Love Wins*, regarding this question about what heaven will be like, "I've heard pastors answer, 'It will be unlike anything we can comprehend, like a church service that goes on forever, causing some to think, 'That sounds more like hell.'"<sup>i</sup>

I have good news for you, the answer to the question “What is heaven like?” can be answered in a one sentence sermon: I don’t know. Honestly, no one still living and breathing on this earth really does. How can they? Renowned theologian and author, Marcus Borg, shortly before he died, writing about what *he* thought the afterlife would be like, “I don’t have a clue. But I am confident that the one who has buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God.”<sup>iii</sup> Heaven, by definition, is inconceivable to us while we are earthbound. For now, we see in a mirror dimly, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13. But then we shall see face to face. Yes, friends, we will see Christ and we will be in the eternal realm of Divine Love. Isn’t knowing that much, enough?

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Did you hear these words of ultimate and immediate comfort that Jesus gave to his troubled and traumatized disciples in the Upper Room? As he said to them, I say to you: heaven is not so much a physical place as it is a state of mind and heart and spirit. In Jesus’ words that include reference to a destination “I go to prepare a place for you.... *and* the revelation that “the way” is actually a relationship with Jesus, tells us two important truths we need to hold side by side. *I am the way. Jesus is with us both here and now and there and then.* Let’s talk first about the here and now aspect of heaven. We are given foretastes and glimpses of heaven every day, if our hearts and minds and spirits are open and attuned to the Jesus frequency. The face of Love on earth as it is in heaven.

I believe you have experienced that love, and you yearn for more, or you wouldn’t be worshipping here right now. Friends, heaven on earth can happen anywhere anytime we are surprised by grace, by beauty, compassion, justice. Seeing three of the children of our church profess their faith: that is heaven for all of us, something we are about to experience here today in a few moments. For me, and maybe for you, watching USA Gold Medal champion, Simone Biles, fly through the air with an uncanny height and velocity during her floor ex routine, sticking the landing with face beaming: That seemed heavenly. Or maybe for others of you it’s more like watching the Packers pull out a win in overtime against the Chicago Bears. Or maybe it’s holding your newborn baby, or grandbaby for the first time, or the five hundredth time, seeing that tiny new face looking at you with wide-eyed wonder. Or heaven can be sharing a cup of coffee, or a glass of wine and a deepening connection with a new friend, or with your lifetime partner. Or perhaps when you are out among the trees, canoeing down a river, or looking closely at the intricate design of a single flower.

You know, those moments when you lose track of time and place. I believe those moments are like heaven on earth. Heaven can be a shower chair, and a first shower after surgery. Or it can be a donated peanut butter sandwich on a long weekend at home where the cupboards are bare. Heaven is wherever acts of love and joy and peace, where missions of mercy, kindness, and humility bring communion, connection, wholeness. Rob Bell puts it like this, “It is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life now in connection to God. Eternal life doesn’t start when we die; it starts now. It’s about experiencing the kind of life now that can endure and survive even death.”<sup>iiii</sup>

Now let's turn to the second question, referring to life after death. To the promise of heaven after we complete our life on earth. **Who gets in?** And we will find our way into this question with the one Thomas asks Jesus, "Lord, we *do not know* where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thank God for Thomas and his willingness to blurt out questions others might be afraid to ask. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The way is the relationship! The way is here and now, walking hand in hand with Christ. Trusting Jesus with "what's next" and the life we are promised after this one. But who gets in? But then here is the next sentence that follows right behind it: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6). Taken out of context, this one verse has been used to do more damage than good over the centuries. You have surely seen it on billboards today as you drive along the highway. I pass a lawn sign with this verse on my way to church every day.

Sadly, tragically, this verse has been weaponized to pummel people spiritually, strong arming or scaring them into becoming a Christian. Not only that, a particular approach to Christianity, or else! Based largely on this particular verse, John 14:6. But really-- how could that possibly be what Jesus meant in those tender moments with his disciples, his last words before he would choose to suffer and die on the cross to save the whole world? Jesus *did not say*, "Christianity is the way. Nor did he say the church is the way. Nor is being Presbyterian, or Catholic, or Evangelical, the way." He said, "I am the way." Building on his own heritage from Exodus 12, the "I am who I am" from the dawn of Creation is the way. The way of Divine Love.

As the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "God is clearly not a Christian. His concern is for all his children." Yes, the man who held the highest position in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, makes this point regarding this very verse, John 14:6. He reminds us that Jesus is not referring here to one form of Christianity or another, (I will remind you that the incarnate Jesus was a Jew). Jesus is talking about God's way of Divine Love that has been present since God created heaven and earth. Tutu asks, "How is it possible for God to have created human beings, all human beings, in his own image and not have endowed them all with some sense, some awareness of his truth, his beauty, and his goodness? "He also asks what about all the people who came before Jesus, from Abraham to Moses, and the prophets? Would Jesus be excluding them with this answer to Thomas? Surely, the Way, the Truth and the Life" is Divine Love for all people and all creation for all time. Unbound by time, culture, or religious tradition.

So, who gets in? Beloved Community: God knows, not us. Karl Barth wrote, and we as Presbyterians believe too: "it is not for me to say. Of one thing I am certain in Jesus Christ, son of God, came for all people in creation." If any are saved it is only by God's grace. One of the most prolific theologians of all time, the Swiss Reformation author Karl Barth wrote a massive 13-volume work *Church Dogmatics* is one of the largest and most profound works of systematic theology ever written. Yet, when he was nearing the end of his life, Barth was asked, "What is the most profound thought that ever entered your mind?" After a brief moment of reflection, Barth replied, "The most profound thought I have ever known is the simple truth: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus loves you and invites to you to come dine at his table. Beloved Community of Easter people, let us come to the table this day from the Easter standpoint. Let us see this table not so much as a *funeral* memorial meal, but rather as *anticipation of the marriage feast of the lamb*, a table where we will dine with Christ, the meat and drink of eternal life, no longer ever separated from Jesus. And for today, we get just a tiny taste of heaven on earth. What more do we really need?

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<sup>i</sup>Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person who ever Lived*, (HarperOne: Fan Francisco, CA, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>ii</sup>Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored* (HarperOne: San Francisco, CA, 2011). (L365 8.3)]

<sup>iii</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (see above for full reference), p.59.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/jesus-loves-me#:~:text=The%20story%20is%20told%20about,the%20Bible%20tells%20me%20so.%22>