

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

“What Happens When We Die”

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I have had the privilege of being present with a few people at the moment of death.

It is an incredible and humbling thing to witness,  
that moment when the human soul lingers between two worlds,  
and then vacates the body completely.

One occasion particularly stands out in my mind.

I was called to Hospice very late one night because a death was immanent.

I did not know the dying man, but I knew his wife very well.

When I walked into the room I noticed that labored breathing called  
the death rattle, when the body is shutting down.

I said a prayer with the family and felt led to place my hand on his head  
and just rub his head.

It seemed like a strange thing to do, but something guided me to do it.

Within one minute of rubbing his head, I literally felt his spirit leave his body.

I felt that spirit hovering there in that room,

while his cold lifeless body was lying there on the bed.

His family felt it too, it was a sacred moment we shared together.

There is no universal agreement about exactly what happens after we die.

In fact, there is a great diversity of opinion on that topic,  
since nobody knows for sure.

If I were to go to Colorado Mills Mall this morning and ask people:

What Happens When You Die? I would get all sorts of answers.

Some would say: You're 6 feet under and when you are dead you are dead.

Some would say: You will either go to Heaven or Hell.

Some would say you go to sleep until the second coming of Christ.

Others believe you will be reincarnated into another life on earth.

In a survey that was done in 2003 by the George Barna group,  
it was revealed that 10% of the population in the United States believe  
that when you die, that's it. You do not have a soul, you have a body and a brain,  
and when the brain stops functioning, it's all over.

Another 8 or 9% believe that is indeed the case, but they're not certain.

So nearly 20% of the population either believe or suspect that when you  
are dead you are dead.

Of all the opinions about life after death, I find that one unbearably depressing.

If this life is all there is, then why

bother trying to be a better human being and improve the world?  
As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If for this life only we have hoped,  
we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Then, Barna found that 18% of the US population believes in reincarnation,  
or the transmigration of the soul.

Reincarnation holds that when you die, your soul leaves your body,  
and it goes to inhabit the body of a new baby that has just been born.  
All of your memories are wiped away, and your spirit begins a new life.

Reincarnation has become increasingly popular in Western culture in recent years  
due to the popularity of Eastern spirituality and Hollywood to a lesser degree.

It comes out of Hinduism first, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century,  
and then Buddhism, which began as a renewal movement within Hinduism.

It is an intriguing and appealing concept for people who think  
that if they really make a mess of this life, they can  
come back and give it another shot, maybe get it right next time.

It has a certain appeal, this idea of having another chance.

But the interesting thing is that Hindus and Buddhists do not have a favorable  
view of reincarnation, in fact the goal of those faiths is to escape reincarnation.  
Their goal is to attain enlightenment, and be free from the endless cycle of rebirth.

They believe that you have to keep coming back to work out your karma,  
if you had bad karma in your last life, you will be born into poverty and affliction  
in your next life so that you can get it right.

If you did well in this life, you bring good karma, and come back with  
more money, better health, more pleasures in your next life.

But you do not remember anything of your life or the people you knew previously.

And you may have to be reincarnated again, and again, and again.

You must continually repeat this cycle, and according to some Hindus and  
Buddhists, you repeat it millions and millions of times.

Finally, you attain enlightenment and release from this cycle of death and rebirth.

When you are finally released, you enter a state of nirvana,  
and are joined with cosmic consciousness of the universe.

While it is very interesting to consider, reincarnation does not appeal to me either.

I do not want to be reborn again and again and again.

I probably have so much bad karma, I'd have to come back a million times,  
and that makes me very tired.

Finally, Barna learned that between 62 to 72% of the population believe in

something like the Christian doctrine of resurrection, that after we die,  
our souls have an opportunity to continue on in some form.

The Christian doctrine holds that we are born only once, and only die once,  
and then we meet God face to face.

In that afterlife our memories are preserved, we are still essentially ourselves,  
and we are reunited with all those loved ones who have gone on before us.

If we have been faithful to God and lived good lives on the earth,  
we will be welcomed into the presence of God to spend eternity.

All physical infirmities are gone, pain and heartache is gone,  
it is a place of freedom and great joy.

If I had a choice between nothingness, reincarnation or resurrection,

I would take the Christian doctrine of resurrection every time.

I don't want to go into nothingness, and I don't want come back again and again.

I would rather experience eternal life with God and my loved ones.

And that is what motivates me to live a good life on this earth here and now.

If it is all nothingness, then why bother?

If you have to be reborn again and again, then why bother?

But if it all matters, if it all has significance, then we should be bothered with  
living good and meaningful lives, lives that make a positive difference  
and are pleasing to God.

On occasion people have asked me: "What sort of body will I have after I die,  
pastor? The body I have always dreamed of?" I don't really know.

I don't know if there will be chocolate fountains in Heaven, either, but I hope so.

I do know that we won't need these bodies any longer, and that is a relief.

We will shed them like a snake sheds its skin, a butterfly bursting from a cocoon.

No more pain, no more limitation, no more longing to look like someone else.

Another concern people have is about the Christian attitude toward cremation.  
It was rejected in the church at one time, not on theological grounds, but because  
the pagans practiced cremation.

Jesus body was put into the tomb, and Christians thought the bodies  
of his followers should go into the tomb as well.

But the rationale was not that if you were cremated you could not be resurrected.

In 175-177 AD in Lyons, Christians were being put to death.

The persecutors of Christians were burning their bodies, because they thought  
that they might need them in the afterlife, and they burned them just to be vicious,  
thinking that these people could not be resurrected without their bodies.

But the Christians said that burning the body does not affect resurrection at all.

You can do whatever you want to the body, it's not the soul.

In the last few centuries cremation has become increasingly accepted. Even the Roman Catholic church, which for a long time resisted cremation, said in recent years that it does not affect your resurrection state.

Those of you who have been in the presence of a dead body know, that once the spirit leaves, the body is just a shell, saran wrap for the soul.

Once the essence of a person has been liberated by physical death, the body no longer matters at all. As Paul wrote:

“We do not lose heart. Because although our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”

Now, the Bible gives us some clues as to what happens when we die, but more than that, the Bible places much greater emphasis upon how death gives focus to our lives here and now.

The Bible suggests that death is so much better than our experience here, therefore it is well worth ordering our priorities while we live, so that we will be rewarded with entrance into Heaven when we die.

Our faith assures us that our souls continue after these bodies waste away.

And that belief should change everything.

That belief means that we start working toward eternal life now.

Paul wrote about it quite a lot, because Paul could not wait to die.

He reached a point later in his ministry, where he did not care at all about what happened to him here, except that it give glory to Jesus Christ.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul is in prison, awaiting news of his execution.

During his lifetime Paul was beaten within inches of his life, he was imprisoned over and over again, he was persecuted by Jews, Gentiles, pagans, some of his fellow Christians, he was hated and reviled and eventually he would be beheaded for his faith.

He wrote to the Philippians, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain....My desire is to go and be with Christ, that is far better.”

But Paul knew that people needed him and his life on earth had a purpose.

So he goes on to say: “I will remain in the flesh on your account, for your progress and joy in the faith.”

Paul really wanted to die, but stayed to lead others to Christ as long as he could.

He did not fear death, he welcomed it because of the promise he had in Christ.

None of us should fear death, for we have that same promise.

And that promise is that Christ has conquered death forever.

Before his own death, Jesus wanted to reassure the disciples.

He knew they were afraid, uncertain, and worried about losing him.

He wanted to assure them that all would be well.

He shared some words that I read at every single funeral service I do:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In God’s house there are many rooms; if it were not so, would I tell you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.

Soon the world will not see me, but you will see me, because I live you will live.

These things I say while I am still with you, but the Holy Spirit will teach you all things. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives, do I give to you.” (John 14–selected verses)

While we may not know exactly what awaits us beyond the grave, but we do know who is there, and Christ is the bridge linking heaven and earth.

Nobody knows exactly what happens after we die.

I have never been close to death myself, so I cannot give a firsthand account.

This is what I think happens when we die:

First of all we travel toward a bright light.

This is the most common and recurring element described in all of the accounts of people who have been pronounced clinically dead and brought back to life.

They all describe a light of incredible brilliance, a light that does not hurt their eyes, but is actually a Being or Presence of Light.

The love and warmth which emanates from this Being of Light is beyond words.

They feel completely accepted and loved by this Being.

A Jewish man described it as an angel.

Of course Christians know this as the light of the world, Jesus Christ.

I believe we are welcomed into this light,

where we will receive a complete review of our lives on earth.

We will see in great detail the ways we blessed and enriched the lives of others, and all the good we have done in the world.

And, we will see the good we could have done, but chose not to.

We will see how we failed and fell short of God’s intentions for us.

We will see the people we have hurt and harmed.

I think this must be the most painful thing of all, especially for someone like

Adolph Hitler—to be fully aware of the pain you have caused others.  
 I believe that in God’s great mercy, we are forgiven and welcomed to eternal life.  
 There we are reunited with departed loved ones, received into the presence of  
 God, and still able to watch over and help those we left behind on the earth.  
 I believe that death actually begins the best phase of our lives,  
 that it is very, very good and there is nothing to fear.

500 years ago in the Mediterranean region people believed that you should never,  
 ever travel west into the Atlantic ocean.

At the western most end of the Mediterranean Sea there was a narrow straight  
 that provided passageway into the Atlantic Ocean.

There you would find a huge rock that goes all the way down to the bottom  
 of the ocean, and extends 1400 feet into the air above the ocean.

We know it as the Rock of Gibraltar.

On one the side of that rock, 500 years ago,  
 you would have seen a huge warning sign, placed there by the Spanish royalty.  
 The sign said, in Latin: “Ne Plus Ultra” meaning “There is Nothing Beyond Here.”

In the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, people believed the earth was flat,  
 and if you proceeded beyond the Rock of Gibraltar, you would fall of the end  
 of the earth, and never be seen or heard from ever again.

Well, one day a brash young Italian sailor went beyond the Rock of Gibraltar.  
 Everyone knew he and his crew were sailing to their most certain deaths, for there  
 was nothing beyond that point but the end of the earth.

But 7 months and 12 days later, they came back,  
 with evidence that they had discovered a new land few people knew existed.

Of course, Christopher Columbus had discovered the land we inhabit now,  
 which was already inhabited by Native peoples who were there much earlier.

But the Spanish royalty had no idea there was anything out there at all.  
 They had to go out and change that warning sign near the Rock of Gibraltar.  
 Instead of “Ne Plus Ultra” “There is Nothing Beyond Here”, they put up a sign  
 which said, “Plus Ultra” “There is Everything Beyond Here.”

Nobody knows precisely what happens when we die.  
 But at the heart of our faith is a resurrection promise.  
 There is indeed something wonderful beyond this life, my friends.  
 And we begin preparing for it right now.  
 There is everything beyond here.

Amen.