

“Core Christianity”
“Is There Something Beyond This Life?”

This is the last message in this series of messages on the core beliefs of the Christian faith. The title of my message is a question, “Is there something beyond this life?”

I suppose as long as human beings have existed, they have asked: Is our life here on earth all there is? When we've breathed our last breath, is that it? When we're young we tend to think we will live forever, but the older we get, the more pressing the question becomes: Is there any kind of meaningful existence after we die?

There are some people who do not believe in any kind of life after death. Death is the end. Period. You die, and you cease to exist. But many people do believe in some kind of life beyond the grave. The Pew Foundation came out with a report near the end of 2015 which indicated that 72% of Americans believe in heaven, and 58% believe in hell. These results changed little from a similar survey done 8 years prior in 2007. Many of those who answered the survey aren't even practicing Christians, but they do believe in heaven, or an afterlife. Most religions of the world have some form of belief in life beyond death.

Certainly at the heart of the Christian faith is a belief in life after death – a meaningful, purposeful existence beyond our physical life. The Apostles' Creed, one of the earliest summaries of Christian beliefs states: “I believe in...the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” Notice, we say in the Apostles' Creed, the “resurrection of the body”, and the life everlasting. Let's talk about that.

A very popular belief today is the belief in the “immortality of the soul”. That there is an “immortal soul” in all of us – and when we die, this soul separates from our body and lives on forever. A lot of Christians assume this is true. But we may be surprised to hear that this idea comes *not* from the Bible, but from ancient Greek philosophy. The Greeks believed the body *inherently* immortal. Death then sets the soul free.

But the Bible teaches that *only God* is immortal. We are mortal. We die. Life ends. Genesis 3:19 says, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” If we are to survive beyond death, God has to do something to overcome our inherent mortality. God has to breathe new life into the dust of our bodies.

Christian faith says God will do that! There will be a resurrection of the body! God will take the dust that was our *physical* body and refashion it into a new *resurrection body*, suitable for the life to come! That's our hope as Christians! Jesus' own death and resurrection was the preview of our resurrection! Those who believe in Him and are in Christ will share a resurrection body like His! The 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians reveals a number of truths about the resurrection. "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20). Notice, "first fruits" - Christ was raised from the dead, and we will follow. "But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' Fool!

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a

body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body...so it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body there is also a spiritual body...what I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...for this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" (1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44, 50, 53-55).

When the Bible talks about the “resurrection of the body” it’s saying that the self, the person, will come to life again in a new form, suitable for eternity. What it is that makes you *you* and me *me* will live on. By the mercy and power of God, we will have a self-conscious existence beyond this life.

In his book *Beliefs of a United Methodist Christian*, Bishop Emerson Colaw tells about someone sitting in a boat, near the shore, reading a book. Suddenly this person was aware that a big, black beetle (a nymph) had come out of the water and crawled up on the boat. He looked over the side of the boat and could see there on the muddy bottom of the lake many of these ugly creatures. Under the heat of the sun the nymph that had crawled out proceeded to die. Then a strange thing happened. His glistening black shell cracked down the back, and out of it came a shapeless mass whose ugliness was transformed into brilliantly colored life. From that mass gradually unfolded four iridescent wings from which the sunlight flashed an array of colors. The metamorphosis complete, this gorgeous dragonfly was soon dipping and soaring over the water. But the body it left behind still clung to the boat. And while the dragonfly explored its wonderful new world, his relatives still plodded below in the mire. Could they understand the beautiful dragonfly flitting over their heads? No – but out of the mud had come an incredible new life! Emerson Colaw wrote: "Now, if God can work such wonders with the lowliest of His creatures, can we not believe in a resurrection, where “this mortal shall put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53)?

Putting on this new resurrection body and living in heaven (or the Kingdom of God) gives us hope of a purposeful life beyond death, of continuity with this life. For instance, since the “resurrection of the body” means we retain our essential personhood, I think we will recognize others in heaven, and we will be known to them. And since we have a “body”, we will be active. Heaven isn’t laying around on clouds floating across a celestial sky, sipping Orange Juliuses, but meaningful activities, and growth, and fulfillment doing God’s will in heaven!

Now, one of the misconceptions that is very prevalent today is that everybody, or just about everybody, will go to heaven. Some believe everybody will (at least eventually) go to heaven – this is called “universalism”. Many believe everybody except the really bad people will go to heaven – that heaven is kind of our “default mode”. But Jesus said some things that challenge this popular belief. He said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the

road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it....not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-14, 21). Jesus also said this, "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and now is here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:25-29).

Because of our sin, which separates us from God, we have gotten off course, and are not heading for heaven! And it's only by trusting Jesus, and what He has done for us, that we can have the hope and promise of eternal life with God.

It's important to realize, also, that eternal life begins now! Listen to what Jesus said in one of His prayers: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Notice, Jesus says, "This *is* eternal life..." (present, now) - to know God, and to know Jesus, whom God has sent. When we surrender our life and will over to Christ, we *already* get a little taste of the joy and peace and closeness to God that will mark our life in heaven!

I can't emphasize too much the importance of our response to Christ in determining what happens to us after we die! Jesus is God's gift to us for our salvation and eternal life with God! John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." It's also important to read on to the next couple of verses: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:17-18).

Page after page of New Testament blurts out this message: If we trust Christ and yield our wills to Him in obedience, we'll enter a relationship with God that will last forever! That's the Christian hope!

Do you and I have this kind of assurance that we have eternal life through God's Son? Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is a physician who became famous after writing her book *On Death and Dying*. She worked with terminally ill patients, and did ground-breaking work in identifying various stages of grief. She discovered through interviews that terminally ill patients were asking questions she didn't feel qualified to answer. Patients wanted to know what comes after death. So she asked a group of theological students to help her in her interviews with patients, but they didn't seem to be much help. She called these theological students together and asked, "How many of you, without any shadow of doubt, believe in life after death?" No one was confident enough to raise their hand! After that, Dr. Kubler-Ross remarked, "I then knew why they were unable to help the patients with their questions about life after death. They were using the right

phrases, but their own uncertainty was coming through in the interviews with the terminally ill patients.”

There are a lot of people today who have no active religious faith, no involvement with a church – who are living with little or no hope of anything beyond this life. *But there are also people who say they are Christians who aren't certain they have eternal life! We say we believe in Jesus. We profess that we believe in eternal life. But if we are really honest, we're not 100% sure. If that's the case, I think we need to be honest about these doubts.*

Just recently a former parishioner died at a relatively young age. He was a genuine Christian. He talked of his faith in the Lord. But his wife shared with me that as he neared the end, he admitted that he was a little bit afraid. Well, that's part of being human! We fear the unknown! Death is the Great Unknown!

One of the unique emphases in our United Methodist tradition has been our focus on Christian assurance – that we can know we are saved. Our United Methodist Discipline refers to this distinctive emphasis in Methodism: “Our Wesleyan heritage also embraces the scriptural promise that we can expect to receive assurance of our present salvation as the Spirit ‘bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.’”

This assurance grew out of John Wesley’s own spiritual quest for this. He was an ordained minister in the Church of England. He preached. He was a missionary. Yet for years, he was not sure God had forgiven him and saved him. It was only when he went to a Bible study and prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, at the age of 35, that God gave him this assurance. Wesley's description of that event have become famous. He wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Romans 8:16 says, “It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit, that we are children of God.” 1 John 5:13 says, “I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may *know* that you have eternal life.” Notice, it says that we may *know*, not just *hope*, that we have eternal life!

If we’re believers, the Holy Spirit wants to give us an inward confidence, beyond all doubt, that we are spiritually reborn and part of God’s forever family! For some, this assurance comes quickly, at the time of our conversion to Christ. For others, it can be a process. The longer we are Christians and the more we grow in Christ, the more that assurance gets hold of us. If you have given your life over to Christ and don't have that inward assurance, ask God for it!

I believe God, in His mercy, is giving us signs these days to reassure us that there is a heaven. Some years back a book came out entitled *Heaven Is For Real*. The book has since been made into a film. It's about a 4 years old boy named Colton Burpo, who had an experience where he was actually taken to heaven. A few weeks ago friends of ours told Nancy and me that they had

just heard a man named Jim Woodford speak and tell of his experience of being taken to heaven. He was a pilot, and he now spends his life going around sharing his incredible story.

I had a friend who was Christian man. A remarkable man. He had served a brief time as the pastor of a church. A brilliant man, he was talented in a number of fields. He was a World War II pilot, a fulltime architect, a concert pianist, and for a brief time he was editor of a Christian magazine. But, to be honest, his theology was - in my humble opinion - a bit shaky and not very orthodox.

We discussed a number of times the issue of life after death. My friend said it wasn't important to him. It didn't matter whether there was or wasn't a heaven. Apparently, he's be content just to die, and that would be it. We would have lively discussions on this topic. I'd say, "I believe it *is* important! It certainly is to me – whether there's something beyond this flesh-and-blood existence."

He was at one point diagnosed with cancer, and lived a number of years battling this disease. He was able to pretty much stay active. He kept up his pace of having interest in many fields of endeavor. But as time went on, his attitude changed. I think he got more serious about Christ, and came back to Christianity's central beliefs in regards to life and death and eternity. Though Rich had already been baptized, he asked me and another pastor friend if we wouldn't baptize him by immersion. He wanted to confirm his trust in Christ, his faith in the life to come. I'll always remember that special day helping to baptize my friend.

It wasn't long after that that my friend died. I was honored to be asked to do his funeral service. I could do it with joy and hope!

Through Christ, we can be certain that we have "a home in glory land that outshines the sun"!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
February 26, 2017*

Illust. Current edition of *Time* magazine (2/23/11) has as cover article, “2045. The Year Man Becomes Immortal” Asterisk: “If you believe humans and machines will become one. Welcome to the Singularity movement.”

Intriguing, somewhat scary article. Increasing number of futurists are saying that perhaps by mid- 2020’s we will have capability to create superhuman intelligence – perhaps to mesh man and machine into some sort of cyborg. This superhuman intelligence (“artificial intelligence”) will out match all of the brainpower in the world. Back in 1993, at a NASA symposium, science fiction writer Vernon Vinge announced, “Within 30 years we will have the means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended.”

No one is sure what this will look like, but some are saying this computer-based superintelligence will help us solve problem of aging and prolong our life spans indefinitely. English biologist, Aubrey de Gray, specializes in life-extension research. He says, “People have begun to realize that the view of aging being something immutable (i.e. unchangeable)...is simply ridiculous.”

In this article, journalist, thinking of the future, writes: “Indefinite life extension

becomes a reality; people die only if they choose to. Death loses its sting once and for all.” (Last sentence echoes words found in 1 Corinthians 15 in the NT)

If think this is mere fantasy, this past November (2010), researchers at Harvard Medical School administered substance called *telomerase* to group of mice suffering from age-related degeneration. The damage went away. The mice didn't just get better; they got *younger*