

I'LL FLY AWAY?

JOHN 5:19-30

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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APRIL 8, 2018/2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Christ is risen!

Welcome to the second Sunday of Easter. I hope you paid attention to our flowered cross on our way in this morning. For those who weren't here last Sunday, we carried it out of the church at the end of our service last Sunday and it's been out there all week, doing its best to bear witness to resurrection.

This week, in particular, with our miserable weather, I thought we could do with a reminder that, a) spring is coming; and, b) far more importantly, Christ is indeed risen, no matter what things look like in the world and in our lives.

And we also remember that Easter is not just a *day* but a *season* in the Christian year which lasts right until Pentecost on May 20. And it is a celebratory season! So, we'll leave these Easter banners up for a while yet.

As promised, today I will be resuming the "Faith Questions" sermon series that began in January and which we left off for the season of Lent in preparation for Easter.

Just to refresh our memories, this was a sermon series based on questions submitted by you, the members of our congregation. Here's the road map of some of the topics that have already been addressed, as well as the ones that I will be tackling over the next four Sundays in April.

[PowerPoint]

Today's question is another big one. And it is a very appropriate topic on the first Sunday after Easter.

Where is the soul after death? Do we go to heaven when we die?

This is a topic where there is a lot of confusion about what Christians actually believe.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I'm going to say the same thing I think I've said with almost all of these questions, which is that there, is far too much bound up with a question like this to adequately address in a 15-20 minute sermon.

So, today, I'm going to try to cover a few basics.

Before I get to the specific question of what happens to the "soul" after death, I think we need to take a step back and locate this question within the bigger question of what Christians actually hope for when it comes to life after death.

Last December, on a warm sunny winter day (unlike our arctic spring thus far!), I attended the funeral for Nick Dyck at a packed Springridge Mennonite in Pincher Creek. It was a lovely service with many fitting tributes to Nick's life and testimonies to the hope that he professed.

We sang a song on that warm sunny day in a little country church that I suspect many of you have sang at many funerals over the years. "I'll Fly Away." Written in 1929 by Albert E. Brumley, the words are familiar:

Some bright morning when this life is over
I'll fly away
To that home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away

When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away
Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly
I'll fly away

Oh, how glad and happy when we meet
I'll fly away
No more cold iron shackles on my feet
I'll fly away

Just a few more weary days and then
I'll fly away
To a land where joys will never end
I'll fly away

I'll fly away, oh glory
I'll fly away in the morning
When I die, Hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away

I can almost hear your toes tapping as I read the words 😊 .

It's a good song. I sang it enthusiastically on that day. It expresses the hope we have for something better beyond this world, beyond the suffering that many endure.

And we sing songs for all kinds of reasons at times like funerals. Because they are familiar, because they bring comfort, because they remind us of people we love.

Not many are looking for theological precision when we come together to mourn and remember and celebrate.

But some are. 😊

Some sit and ask questions like, "Is this true? Does this express what we hope for as Christians? Shedding the shackles of our miserable bodies and flying away to celestial shores?"

Do Christians believe that the goal of human life is to go to heaven when we die? That we have immortal souls that live on past our physical death?

What actually is the substance of what we hope for as followers of Jesus?"

I did a lot of reading this week—more than I usually do for a sermon. I spent a lot of time in N.T. Wright’s excellent book *Surprised by Hope* which I recommend to anyone seeking to learn more about to these questions.

I also read a marvelous passage from American pastor and writer Frederick Buechner. It was such a good passage that I decided to simply quote it at length as part of my sermon.

I don’t do this often, but every time I sat down to try to explain things in my own words this week, I ended up thinking that Buechner did it better.

This is taken from his book *Wishful Thinking* and a discussion of the concept of “immortality.” Buechner is convinced—as I and many others are—that many Christians are confused about what this is and about what connection it has to genuinely Christian hope:

Immortal means death-proof. To believe in the immortality of the soul is to believe that though John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave, his soul goes marching on simply because marching on is the nature of souls just the way producing butterflies is the nature of caterpillars. Bodies die, but souls don't...

[T]his is not the biblical view, although many who ought to know better assume it is. The biblical view differs in several significant ways:

1. [T]he biblical understanding of human beings is not that they *have* bodies, but that they *are* bodies. God made Adam by slapping some mud together to make a body and then breathing some breath into it to make a living soul. Thus the body and soul that make up human beings are as inextricably part and parcel of each other as the leaves and flames that make up a bonfire. **When you kick the bucket, you kick it 100 percent. All of you. There is nothing left to go marching on with.**
2. The idea that the body dies and the soul doesn't is an idea that implies that the body is something rather gross and embarrassing, like a case of hemorrhoids. The Greeks spoke of it as the prison house of the soul. The suggestion was that to escape it altogether was

something less than a disaster. **The Bible, on the other hand, sees the body in particular and the material world in general as a good and glorious invention. How could it be otherwise when it was invented by a good and glorious God?** The Old Testament rings loud with the praise of trees and birds and rain and mountains, of wine that gladdens our hearts and oil that makes our faces shine and bread that strengthens us. Read Psalm 104, for instance. Or try the Song of Solomon for as abandoned and unabashed a celebration of the physical as you're apt to find anywhere. As for the New Testament, Jesus himself, far from being a world-denying ascetic, was accused of being a wino and a chowhound (Matthew 11:19). When he heard that his friend Lazarus was dead, he didn't mouth any pious clichés about what a merciful release it was. He wept. **The whole idea of incarnation, of the word becoming flesh, affirms the physical and fleshly in yet another way, by declaring that it was a uniform even God wasn't ashamed to wear.** Saint Paul undoubtedly had his hang-ups, but when he compares flesh unfavorably to spirit, he is not talking about body versus soul, but about the old person without Christ versus the new person with him.

3. Those who believe in the immortality of the soul believe that life after death is as natural a human function as waking after sleep. **The Bible, instead, speaks of resurrection. It is entirely unnatural. We do not go on living beyond the grave because that's how we are made. Rather, we go to our graves as dead as a doornail and are given our lives back again by God (i.e., resurrected), just as we were given them by God in the first place, because that is the way God is made.**
4. All the major Christian creeds affirm belief in resurrection of the body. In other words, **they affirm the belief that what God in spite of everything prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of human beings but a new and revised version of all the things that made them the particular human beings they were and that they need something like a body to express: their personality, the way they looked, the sound of their voices, their peculiar capacity for creating and loving, in some sense their faces.**

5. The idea of the immortality of the soul is based on the experience of humanity's indomitable spirit. **The idea of the resurrection of the body is based on the experience of God's unspeakable love.**¹

This, for me, is a succinct summary both of the confusion that many people have around what comes after death as well as an articulation of what Christians have actually affirmed, right from that first Easter.

And I'm glad that this question came up so soon after Easter (almost like I planned it that way!).

For those first witnesses, resurrection was not a synonym for passing on to the afterlife, or a soul flying up to the heavens. These are not remotely Jewish ideas but come from Greek philosophy (Plato's concept of an ideal realm where everything here is an imperfect approximation).

Resurrection meant that something that was dead had come alive again. It meant that the same Jesus who they had witnessed bleeding and suffering on a Roman cross had really died. And had really been raised to life. Bodily life.

We ought to remember that Jesus didn't come back as a ghost or an apparition, much as many have claimed that this must have been what happened (resurrection was tough to swallow then, as now!).

Yes, his body was different. He could move through walls, appear here and there. Yes, it took people a while to figure out it was him occasionally. But he was recognizably Jesus.

Jesus was raised, bodily, from the dead, and this is what Christians have always affirmed as our hope, too.

So, what does this have to say about the question?

Where is the soul after death? Do we go to heaven when we die?

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

So, where are our loved ones after death? Quite simply, for the Christian, they are with Christ.

There is mystery involved here.

We don't know how time works after death. It's possible that for those who die, time ceases to function in the same way, and they simply wake up at the final judgment. Or it's possible that they somehow experience time passing in the presence of Christ in a way we can't imagine.

We simply don't know how this all works. But we do know that there will be a final reckoning for all people at the end of time, and that those who are in Christ will be raised to life in the new creation.

Here's how N.T. Wright puts it:

[A]ll the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness. Though this is sometimes described as sleep, we shouldn't take this to mean that it is a state of unconsciousness. Had Paul thought that, I very much doubt that he would have described life immediately after death as "being with Christ, which is far better." Rather, *sleep* here means that the *body* is "asleep" in the sense of "dead," while the real person—however we want to describe him or her—continues.

This state is not, clearly, the final destiny for which the Christian dead are bound, which is... bodily resurrection. But it is a state in which the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ while they await that day.²

This makes sense of a phrase that we often use or hear around death: Rest in peace, rise in glory.

We can say that we "go to heaven when we die" *as long as* we understand that this is a temporary state.

² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 171-72.

As Wright is fond of saying, the Christian hope is not in life after death. It is in life *after* life after death, in the new creation that God will create, where he will dwell with his people and death and sorrow will be no more, with resurrection bodies that are no long subject to death and decay and sorrow and pain. This is a glorious hope.

I want to conclude with just a few thoughts based on our reading from the gospel of John

The passage isn't really about the chronology of the afterlife, although it does talk about resurrection of the dead.

It is more about Jesus responding to those who are accusing him of blasphemy by equating himself with the Father. He had just healed on the Sabbath. In a few chapters he will summon Lazarus from his grave. He is doing things that seem very God-like, and the religious leaders are getting angry.

Jesus' words in our text today are a response to this.

And they provide us with a good place to end: with the basic and profoundly hopeful truth that Jesus is the one who gives life.

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. 22 Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.

The same God who breathed a world into being can be trusted to do it again. The Incarnate Word of God who was present at the beginning is the same one who will usher in the new heavens and the new earth, and the new humanity.

The same Jesus who healed and taught and showed mercy and died for his friends and his enemies is the one who will summon us at the end of time and be our judge.

Jesus has the power and the authority to grant life.

At the end of it all, it comes down to the question of whether or not we can trust God for what comes next, even if the precise chronology eludes us. I think that if we keep

Jesus in mind as the truest picture of who God is and how God works, and as our example in death as in life, we can.

So, to return to the song I began with and the title of my sermon (albeit with a question mark). Can we sing I'll Fly Away?

Yes, I think we can.

As long as by "fly away" we mean that we are departing to be with Christ in anticipation of "flying" with him to the new heaven and the new earth.

As long as by "celestial shores" we don't have in mind clouds and harps and disembodied souls floating around the heavens for all eternity, but new creation with new bodies that are more real and physical than anything we have yet experienced or can even imagine.

As long as the "iron shackles" and "prison walls" we look forward to escaping do not represent the material world *as such* but the material world *as presently configured*.

As long as we don't think that bodies and created stuff is bad and to be escaped for the *real* world which is spiritual, not physical. As long as we have in mind resurrection bodies not ghostly souls.

As long as we remember that for Christians, we are anticipating not simply "life after death" but "life *after* life after death.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

