

**Christianity, 21**  
**17. "What's on the other side?"**

Text: John 20: 19-20, Revelation 21: 1-4

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**On Labor Day weekend Pam and I traveled to her hometown in Pennsylvania.** Though it may sound odd, we drove nearly 700 miles just to take a walk in a graveyard ó the place where many of her family have found their rest.

Our mission to Lewisburg didn't bear the edges of unfinished grief and so there was not sadness as we took our stroll. It was, instead, curiously, even mystically connective - something like a walk through an old neighborhood.

Pam read the names etched in stone and I listened. It was almost as a scene from Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" bringing to awareness the presence of death in the midst of life, or maybe of the reality of life's inexorable passing toward the horizon of death.

Pam said, "They all live here now. They're all on the other side." It was just four years ago this month that we stood on that very ground for her mother's service, and less than five years for her father. "There's Jenny Schretengast," she pointed. "She always kept the neatest house," Pam remarked, "and she made really good sour-kraut."

And then a few rows down and across the lane were Uncle Bud and Aunt Dot - almost like when they were alive. They were both quite influential in the community, as Bud was president of the local bank. Pam had a special fondness for Aunt Dot as her grandmother's sister, and I'm told that our daughter Karen inherited Dot's gift for chatter and story!

The words circled back: "They all live here now. They're all on the other side."

Today we take another step in an occasional series of sermons intended to open up an understanding of Christian faith for this 21<sup>st</sup> century of ours. This is number seventeen and the guiding question before us is: "What's on the other side . . . of life?" But be not fooled: though the focus is on death it is just as much about life because the two have always been, will always be, inextricably connected, impossible to separate.

**Let's start by turning the question in biblical light.** That's always a good place to begin as scripture keeps us grounded with thoughts far larger and deeper than our own.

So "what's on the other side?" The Holy Word is both clever and kind in this regard. Instead of leading us into smugness with certitude we are given metaphors, hunches and images around which to wonder. They are not in any way meant as absolutes, rather, as holy clues to take fully to heart and yet also to hold very lightly.

And so like an impressionistic painting we hear phrases like: "I shall dwell in the house of God forever" . . . "a land flowing with milk and honey" . . . "a new heaven and a new

earthö . . . . . öa banquet overflowing with hospitalityö . . . öa mansion with many roomsö . . . öa heavenly realm which eyes have not seen nor ears heard.ö And this one I just love: öI looked, and there in heaven a door stood open . . .ö

One of my professors in seminary, Gabe Fackre, was fond of saying that these biblical images are something like spaghetti on a cool autumn evening. You can catch the sweet aroma, the savory smell of sauce and meatballs in the kitchen - as in the next room. And though you can't see the table yet and you don't know who's coming to dinner the fragrance tells the truth: something good and rich is present just as promised.

**Deeper now and in more theological light.** Christian faith proclaims in no uncertain terms that God is everywhere. Or to tangle it up in double negatives: there is nowhere that God is not, nothing that God cannot transcend, no distance that God cannot bridge.

I've always been curious about one of the resurrection appearances in the Gospel of John. The disciples were gathered in a room and within and a house that was shut and secured ó this in fear for what the Roman authorities might do to followers of Jesus. But then we are told that into the impenetrable safe place Jesus suddenly appeared among them. So how did he do that? One could imagine that the solid walls and secured door were not real so that he could pass through them; or that the walls and doors were very real but the presence of Jesus was more real than any such barrier or structure. Which is also to say that the power of God can bridge and transcend and connect in ways that that we do not understand but that can be and are experienced as very real.

So by extension reach back with me to my opening story. We walked among graves stones that are real, with names that are real, and on earth that is real. Most important, we walked among deaths that are real. But God is more real than death just as Jesus was more real than those secured walls and doors.

**And then in pastoral light, one more look.** As such I have seen and heard voices of witness and affirmation about crossing over. I have heard it in the images and thoughts, the sighs and sights of those who are dying. And I have seen it in the faces and lives of families left in grief. The Holy Spirit, by whatever name, attends these moments.

Perhaps you have read the story of Eben Alexander as he journeyed into the world beyond. He is the author of Proof of Heaven<sup>1</sup>, an unlikely book for a clinically driven linear thinking neurosurgeon to have put to print. It's been on the best-seller for more than a year - which tells you something of the power of his story and the hunger among us to know more. Among those pages he names and claims mystical moments wherein he was in the presence of the Divine source of the universe itself.

But we need not look that far. As my dad faced his final days there were moments when it was so clear to me that he was seeing far beyond the room at St. Mary Home. These were not hallucinations but affirmations of something else. Something more. Something deeper. One afternoon he nearly chirped as he said öGLM!ö GLM was what he called

his grandfather, his initials being GLM, George Lincoln Moir, born on the day that Lincoln was shot. He was seeing and talking to his grandfather!

Maggie Callanan, a hospice nurse who has witnessed more than 2,000 deaths calls these "nearing death awareness" and advises caregivers and family members not to correct such claims but instead engage and allow the person to tell more about their story and experience.<sup>ii</sup>

**Pam was only a few steps ahead of me.** "Over there," she gestured. "That's Larry Lawson's father. He used to own the shoe store. And over there in the next row is Mrs. Erdley - she taught at the high school with my mother."

And . . . so to our wondering . . . "what's on the other side?" . . . we have biblical images and hints . . . a God who transcends death . . . and the Holy Spirit who attends in ways we never know.

But what do you think? How might you answer? And what do you believe? I'll leave you to wonder and perhaps to tell, and, as always, in the living spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Eben Alexander, M.D. Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife. Simon and Schuster, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> "Crossing Over" in Century Marks. Christian Century, July 24, 2013, p. 8.