

Patricia Halinen March 12, 2023 (Memorial Service)

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and *afterward you will receive me to glory.*” [Ps 73:23-24]

“I tell you, many will come from the east and the west and *recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven...*” [Matt 8:11]

“Truly, I say to you, today *you will be with me in Paradise.*” [Luke 23:43]

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, *I will come and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*” [John 14:1-3]

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling... So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord... Yes, we are of good courage, and *we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*” [2 Cor 5:6-8]

“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. My desire is *to depart and be with Christ*, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” [Phil 1:21-24]

“To the one who conquers I will grant *to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*” [Rev 2:7]

A small sampling of texts of Holy Scripture – from the OT, the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and the Book of Revelation – that unmistakably, emphatically, consistently, and beautifully teach that those who trust in Jesus Christ will live with him forever. Their death in this world will be, so far from the extinction of their existence, their entrance into heaven where they will live on as fully authentic human beings, the same people they were in this world, but now made perfect and immortal in holiness, peace, and joy. This is the Christian hope! And by hope the Bible means not a *wish*, but a *confident expectation*.

It is, after all, *the* great question posed by human existence; by the life of creatures such as ourselves: intelligent, thoughtful, emotional, spiritual, and inescapably moral, on the one hand, and mortal on the other. It is this question, the answer to which determines virtually everything about human life: its meaning, its importance, and how it ought to be lived. I am speaking, of course, of death and, in particular, whether death is the end of human existence or the beginning of its next and final chapter.

There have always been atheists who have maintained that death is the end of human existence, of human life, full stop. And I say “atheists” advisedly; since it is difficult to find someone who

believes in life after death who is not some form of theist; who doesn't have some kind of belief in God. Life after death would seem rather clearly to presuppose the existence of a being who could make that possible and who would have ordered human life in this way. (Naturalism, the theory that life, and especially human life, is nothing but the stuff of which it is made and that there is no such thing as a soul, is an utterly inadequate foundation for robust belief in life after death.) In the modern western world, while they remain a distinct minority, those who deny that human life continues beyond the grave – I mean sentient, wakeful, intelligent human life (the same person, the same mind, with the same history of life in this world, but now living in another world) – I say, the number of the deniers of life after death has been steadily increasing.

When Napoleon, in the early 19th century, expressed his opinion that “Death is nothing but a sleep without dreams,” [Andrew Roberts, 793] he would have been speaking for a very small number of Europeans. When Winston Churchill, in the middle of the 20th century, said that in dying “we simply go out, like candles,” he would have been expressing the opinion of a still small, but somewhat larger share of the population of the western world. It was skepticism more convincing to intellectuals; academic types like the English philosopher Bertrand Russell, Churchill's younger contemporary. But by that time Russell feared little scorn from his upper-class contemporaries in the academy for saying, “I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.” He went on to claim, even to boast,

“I am not young and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.”

But, of course, *that is precisely the issue*. Was there a serious argument that the denial of life after death meant no loss to life's meaning in this world, or was he, in fact, whistling in the dark; talking so confidently in hopes of keeping the hounds at bay? Death is, as the French philosopher, Albert Camus, once observed, “philosophy's only problem.” But he was admitting what Russell would not. If life has meaning things are bearable. If it does not, much becomes so much more difficult to bear. And if death is the end and we are but animals, are we not simply lying to ourselves if we say that our lives have some genuine, objective meaning? That is, real meaning, not simply a momentary pleasure or satisfaction, such as an animal might experience after a good meal.

It has been said that to believe with certainty, one must begin by doubting. I don't think that is always the case, but I do believe there is truth in that observation. Most of us have at least had doubts flicker in our minds concerning this most crucial assertion of our Christian faith. It is, after all, another of those few assertions of fact according to which our faith as the followers of Jesus Christ stands or falls. This was true, and known to be true, from the very beginning. That the entire edifice of Christian belief absolutely depends upon the reality of life after death is not only true, but so obviously true that the apostles themselves did not hesitate to say it was so. If it were not the case that, by faith in Christ, we live on after we die, then our faith is not knowledge, it is superstition; it is not a fact, it is a fancy; it is not hope in the strong, biblical sense of that word, but wishful thinking. If untrue, the expectation of life after death must be reckoned as perhaps the most effective opiate of the people ever invented. So it must be, Paul said, if Christ

were not raised from the dead and if he had not, in that way, opened the way to eternal life for those who trust in him.

It is hardly difficult to understand why a doubt might rise in our minds. The events upon which rest that understanding of death and life after death happened a very long time ago. The documents which contain this wonderful message were written, in some cases, earlier still, and in what was, in some ways, a very different world. None of us has ever personally witnessed the passage to a new form of existence following death. No one we know has returned from the other side to tell us what he or she discovered there. Death occurs and, according to sight and sense, the person is no more. We cheerfully admit that there is no demonstrative proof, such as the calculations of mathematics or the experimental evidence of the laboratory, by which we might verify the claims of Holy Scripture or settle the question beyond possibility of disproof. There is no Pythagorean theorem of eternal life. But then, there is no such theorem regarding anything that really matters in human life. There is nothing less like the multiplication tables than human life; nothing less like the laboratory than the human heart. We Christians are hardly the only ones who must live by faith and not by sight!

More than this, we are surrounded by a culture that thinks, speaks, and lives without a thought to our faith in a future and far better life, as if it were utterly irrelevant, or pours scorn on it as the outworn idea of a superstitious and unscientific age. It is always harder to maintain confidence and conviction in the unseen when everyone around you lives without any such conviction, when the subject is rarely if ever raised in polite conversation, and when it does not appear to have any effect upon the way people live their lives. Other things command people's attention; not death, and not what lies beyond. But try as anyone and everyone might, it is a fact that we all will die and so the question – is it or is it not the end – can hardly be avoided, at least by a thoughtful, serious human being. The more thoughtful atheists have at least thought it important to attempt some defense of their skepticism.

So here is the question: the question of all questions. Is there life after death? Is there to be judgment for the wicked and for those who have spurned the offer of eternal life in Jesus Christ, to be sure? But, supremely, and for our purposes this evening especially, is there eternal *life*; life worthy to be called life; life as every human being knows deep in his or her heart, is what life is meant to be? Is there such life on the other side, a life that lasts forever? Or have we Christians been deluding ourselves with a dream? When we read the beautiful, powerful, heartfelt expressions of faith in the prospect of heaven, even eager anticipations of it, such as Christians have uttered throughout history, can we believe, as some do, that they are all a gigantic self-delusion.

Hear Hugh MacKail, the Scottish Covenanter, a few days before he was to be executed for his faith: "How good is the news! Four days now until I see Jesus!"

Or what of this from Amy Carmichael, the intrepid missionary to India and savior of so many little girls from the cruel fate of temple prostitution: "When you hear I have gone, jump for joy!"

Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer to a prisoner friend when the Gestapo had come to take him away to his execution, “This is the end. For me the beginning of life.”

Or what of this in one of Samuel Rutherford’s beautiful letters to his friend Lady Kenmure. “Madam, tire not, weary not; ... when ye are got up thither, and have cast your eyes to view the golden city, and the fair and never-withering Tree of Life...ye shall then say, ‘Four-and-twenty hours’ abode in this place is worth threescore and ten years’ sorrow upon earth.”

Were these good and wise people deluding themselves; or did they know the truth that many others either could not be bothered to find for themselves or positively did not want to learn? Do they point the way to the meaning of life or should we look to the Bertrand Russells of the world and their blithe dismissal of what would seem to be the essential prerequisite for understanding what every human being believes about his or her life; namely that *it really does matter*?

Let me remind you this evening, as we contemplate the death of a faithful Christian woman many of us knew well, of just some of the reasons for our confidence in all Holy Scripture has taught us of what happens when Christians die.

First, our entire nature as human beings bears witness to the fact that we were made for more than this. We all aspire to more than we ever experience or find in this life, and we cannot help but long for what we cannot find. Where in the world did this come from? Why is there this terrible chasm, everywhere we look, between what we are and what we know we should be; who we are and what we want to be; what we have and what we wish we had? Why does this life fall short for us all? Why is it impossible for us to be fully satisfied? Human beings, all of them, are born wanting a better life, better in many ways. There is no evidence that any other animal has such longing or experiences such frustration. The theory of evolution cannot explain this fact of human experience; the longing for personal fulfillment is certainly not essential to reproduction. But it is the deepest fact of human existence; this sense of being unfulfilled; of being made for more, *of wanting to be happy, really, permanently happy*. What is more, the furious search for that fulfillment in all the wrong places is likewise a feature of human life.

This is what C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote to a seeker,

“At one time I was much impressed by Arnold’s line, ‘Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread.’ But surely, tho’ it doesn’t prove that one particular man will *get* food, it *does* prove that there is such a thing as food! i.e. if we were a species that didn’t normally eat, weren’t designed to eat, would we feel hungry? You say the materialist universe is ‘ugly.’ I wonder how you discovered that! If you are really a product of a materialistic universe, how is it you don’t feel at home there? Do fish complain of the sea for being wet?? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been, or would not always be, purely aquatic creatures? Notice how we are perpetually *surprised* at Time. (‘How time flies! Fancy John being grown-up and married! I can hardly believe it!’) In heaven’s name, why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is *not* temporal.”
(Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, 93]

There is a great deal of human life that utterly transcends a purely naturalistic explanation of it. But that life continues after death explains it all! And that human beings are bondslaves of sin, inveterate rebels against their Maker explains why so many fail to obtain the very life they crave. A philosophy of life is to be judged by its power to explain what everyone knows and can see. Holy Scripture does that as no other philosophy has ever done or come close to doing. And fundamental to the Bible's philosophy of life is its assertion that life continues after death.

Second, fundamental to all human experience is the moral dimension of our thought and life. It is so much of what makes us human beings. All of us, believers and unbelievers alike, make moral judgments all the time, at every turn. We approve and disapprove because we judge something to be right and something else to be wrong. And those judgments are immensely important to us. We are deeply invested in our morality.

But the fact is, and it is a fact impossible to deny, no one can either explain this fundamental characteristic of the human person or defend it as meaningful if we are simply animals, here today, gone forever tomorrow. There is no *moral* difference between the lion and the wildebeest, though one kills the other; it kills, it does not murder! No atheist has ever provided a firm foundation for ethics, for moral judgment. And the more honest among them, like Albert Einstein, will admit, however pathetically, that our ethical standards can only be, in fact, nothing but a necessary charade. Though there is no actual moral difference between the criminal and his victim, for everyone's sake we need to act as if there were. Really? Is that all that human morality is, a temporary expedient that *means* nothing at all.

Bertrand Russell, as an atheist, of course would have denied that there are moral absolutes and that it is incumbent upon human beings to acknowledge and obey them. He was all his life a moral iconoclast; a tearer-down of moral standards. He would have admitted, standing on his feet in debate, that no naturalist philosophy could justify either the pacifist's ethics or the jihadist's. No philosophy could compel moral assent. But then Russell, like all others before and after him, was forever criticizing, and often bitterly, the thought and behavior of others, not as inconvenient, not as unintelligent, but as immoral, as wrong, as deserving condemnation. He couldn't help himself. That profound hypocrisy was characteristic of his life. Which is why it was said of him that, though no one would doubt that Russell had a powerful brain, no one with any sense would ever go to him for advice about anything that mattered. He was, in many ways, a genuinely immoral man; he treated women badly, and often bit the hand that fed him. But then, what does "immoral" even mean, and why should it offend us so, if there is no lawgiver, no judgment, and no life after death. To believe in life after death is hardly a leap in the dark. It is the one thing that explains why you and I and every other human being are what we are; why we think and act as we do; and why we can't help it. We have been made in the image of the eternal and holy God and that fact is stamped indelibly upon our hearts and lives.

Third, there is the impressive witness of history. Surely it is a fact worthy of our contemplation that from the beginning of human history mankind has believed that life continued after death. It used to be thought and said that the early Hebrews had no conception of life after death. If they didn't, they would have been the only ancient people who did not. The Egyptians didn't stuff the tombs of their kings with what they supposed the dead Pharaoh would need in the afterlife only

because they needed to make space in the palace for the furniture of his successor! But where on earth did this universal expectation come from. It is peculiar to human beings, but virtually universal among them. True enough, there have been many malformations of this expectation as a result of the culture and religion of a time and place, but the expectation is found everywhere and always. Why on earth? Again, C.S. Lewis posed this same question to a seeker, who admitted that, obviously, human beings have long thought that there is life after death.

“But supposing one believed and was wrong after all? Why, then you would have paid the universe a compliment it doesn’t deserve. Your error would even so be more interesting and important than the reality. And yet how could that be? How could an idiotic universe have produced creatures whose mere dreams are so much stronger, better, subtler than itself?” [*A Severe Mercy*, 92]

Far more likely is that human beings have eternity in their hearts and so, invariably, gave expression to it. Sinfully sometimes; foolishly often; but always and everywhere the human heart cannot imagine that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, but signifying absolutely nothing.

Fourth and finally, more important than any of those arguments, or the many others that might be made for the reality of life after death, is the witness of Holy Scripture and, supremely, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have so many reasons to believe *everything* we are taught in the Word of God, but *this* supremely.

People too often and too easily forget that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was an idea whose time had not remotely come. No Jew believed in a resurrection in the middle of history; and no Jew expected the Messiah to die, much less then to rise again. The resurrection of the body was utterly uncongenial to the intellectual taste of the Greco-Roman world. There has never been a plausible explanation for the *idea* of Christ’s resurrection appearing when it did *except that to everyone’s shock it had happened*. But admit the resurrection, you must then admit its meaning, all the more when that meaning is so carefully and emphatically explained in the writings of those who had been themselves the witnesses of the risen Christ. Life goes on and in a new and more wonderful way; at least for those who are *in Christ*. His resurrection is the unanswerable disproof of every seemingly sophisticated form of skepticism about life after death.

If anyone says to you, “the Resurrection is a myth; no intelligent person can believe that Jesus rose from the dead,” your reply is this: “Baloney! Millions of very intelligent people – who know perfectly well that, as a rule, people do not rise from the dead – believe that Jesus, nevertheless, did so; a great many of them after once *not* believing that he did. The NT writers knew perfectly well how difficult it would be for a Greco-Roman citizen to believe in the resurrection, but they proclaimed it as a historical fact because they were themselves eyewitnesses of that fact. And, in the same way, multitudes of skeptics who were, for one reason or another, forced to think about the evidence of the NT and of human life in general came to accept that it is and must be a fact of history. Indeed, *the* fact of history. The NT accounts of Christ’s resurrection and its aftermath bear the mark of real history. There is nothing whatever mythical about them.

Add these reasons together, and the many others I might have mentioned, and you see that a conviction that life – my life, your life – continues after death is hardly a leap in the dark. It is the furthest thing from wishful thinking; all the more given the fact that it is good news only for those who have surrendered their imagined freedom to become the servants of Jesus Christ.; the very thing Bertrand Russell refused to do and hated the very thought of doing, as do many today who think as he did. There is nothing unreasonable in our conviction, our confidence. It is, after all, the only sufficient reason for the fundamental characteristics of human life, the characteristics every human being knows for himself or herself; knows and can't help but know.

Brownlow North, the Scottish lay-evangelist of the 19th century, used to rivet a congregation by beginning his message with the words: "I can tell you to a minute how long your life is going to last." And then he would say, "It is to be as long as the life of God." You are immortal. You will never cease to exist; you can no more go out of existence than God can, who made you in his image and likeness.

Our confidence in Patricia's on-going and wonderfully happy life is not a leap in the dark, a hope against hope; it is the consistent witness of our own natures, the testimony of history, and the promise of the one who conquered death and offers the same victory to all who trust in him, as Patricia most certainly did.

C.S. Lewis had been instrumental in bringing to faith in Christ a number of students while a teacher at Oxford University in the 1940s and 50s. One such student, an American, had finished his course and was leaving for home. They shared a farewell lunch at a favorite pub. As they parted on the street, Lewis said to his young friend, something Christians often say to one another, in one way or another. With a cheerful grin he said, "At all events, we'll certainly meet again, here – or *there*." Then he plunged into the traffic and crossed the street. Having reached the other side, he turned around toward his younger friend, raised his voice over the noise of the cars and buses, and bellowed, "Besides, Christians NEVER say goodbye!"