

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008, I dedicate this sermon to the excellent staff of First Congregational Church. They bless me each day here at work, as I spend time with them. Their faith, laughter, love, humor and delight in life inspire me. To each one, I dedicate this. As always, I dedicate this effort to the glory of God!

“What is Heaven Like?”

John 20:1-18

Part VI of VII in the Lenten sermon series:

“Questions My Father Asked Me”

Last year, my father battled through cancer.

On November 4, Dad wrote: “Dear Tim, I have thought of you a lot from time to time as I view the world around me. I’ve wondered, ‘How would Pastor Tim respond?...’”

He went on to ask 26 questions. From his questions, I formed this sermon series. The first five sermons have answered these questions: Why Repent? - How Do I Live My Faith in My Family? - What Are the Key Teachings of the Bible? - How Do I Know the Life I Live and the Decisions I Make are According to God’s Will? - Who Is Jesus?

There were other questions, which will be the basis of a series in the future: Do Christians Today Know What Theology Is? - What Is Salvation? - How Are We Saved? - How Do You Define a Christian? - How Do we Pray? - What are the Keys to the Kingdom for our Daily Lives?

*Next Sunday I conclude this series with: Is Doubting One’s Faith Wrong if We are Truly Seeking Truth for our Lives?
Today, the question is: **What is Heaven Like?***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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While many of us have read books about the afterlife, visions of heaven, and people’s firsthand encounters with Jesus through near-death experiences, most of us are not sure what heaven is like. We **hope** that heaven is beautiful, vast, filled with light and our loved ones. We hope heaven holds a reserved spot for us.

While we do not know what heaven looks like, we know heaven is important to Americans. According to a Gallup Poll taken in May 2007, roughly 9 in 10 Americans believe in God and almost an equal number (81%) believe in heaven. Although Americans are sure about heaven, we are not so sure that “heaven holds place for those who pray” (Hey, hey, hey). Only 69% of Americans believe that they have a good chance of getting to heaven (still very good odds). 53% believe doing good works will get them to heaven, which means a whopping 47% aren’t counting on good works to do the job (or perhaps they aren’t DOING good works).

So, we Americans convincingly believe in God, clearly believe in Heaven, less clearly believe we will get there, and even less clearly than that, believe the good we do on earth will get us there. But, the question still remains: What is heaven like?

As friends and family members have faced death, some of us have talked and listened to their visions of heaven or lack thereof. I have been blessed by your beloved ones’ sometimes glorious and sometimes simple visions of heaven. People have shared everything from the gates of God’s glory open wide and streets paved with gold to an eternity of best moments spent with friends and loved ones.

At funerals and memorial services we often turn to comforting words of assurance which speak of the many mansions in God's house, a new heaven and new earth where "*death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more*" (Rev. 21:4). While this may suffice after our loved ones have died and entered God's glory, we look to scripture to offer something a bit more reassuring when we are on the earthbound side of our heaven bound journey.

In his 2007 Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, Dr. Peter Hawkins spoke of "The Preacher in Paradise." Dr. Hawkins wrote:

Scripture is reticent about (offering stock assurances concerning heaven). Samuel is brought back from Sheol, Jesus discourages thoughts of ongoing family ties and Paul speaks of a resurrection body that is barely imaginable . . . Brief moments in Ezekiel, Daniel, the Book of Enoch, and the Revelation according to John variously paint a picture of the celestial paradise that tradition has lived off for more than two millennia.

What does heaven look like? *On the one hand, there is a throne, a divinity who sits upon it, and on every side a concert of continuous praise; on the other, a jeweled cube as radiant as a bride, in which Eden's paradise and Jerusalem's holy city join in one perfect place where God reigns eternally. Add to this angels and incense; elders and crowns; crystal rivers and trees in perpetual fruit, and four living creatures (their wings emblazoned with eyes) - all of this converging as a cry goes up, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God the almighty, who was and is and is to come." (Rev. 4:8). (Dr. Peter Hawkins, the 2007 Yale Beecher Lecture, *The Preacher in Paradise*, pp. 3-4).*

As vivid as this "official" vision of heaven is (according to scripture), through the ages, theologians have sought many definitions of heaven. Aquinas believed heaven was one uninterrupted act of divine contemplation. While Aquinas cornered the solitary heavenly vision, Augustine, Bonaventure and Giles of Rome believed

that paradise was a shared experience. Giles said, *“The blessed will speak with one another freely and in audible language, not because they need to know anything, but out of the sheer pleasure of conversing.”* (Hawkins, p. 6).

Centuries later, our own Puritan “light,” Jonathan Edwards asked his parishioners to expect reunion with family members and friends and also with *“the patriarchs and (church) fathers and saints of the Old and New Testament . . . with whom on earth we were only conversant by faith.”* (Hawkins, p. 7).

By the end of the 18th century, Emmanuel Swedenborg projected a celestial vision which included marriage, sex, cities, orchards, gardens and our world - but in a perfected state. In his mind there would be no eternal rest. We would be busy in our angelic state continuing our old virtues with more gusto as citizens of heaven. Everything and everyone we loved in heaven - only better and complete (Hawkins, p.8).

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*, author Marilynne Robinson (an active member of the UCC I might point out!) tells the story of the Reverend John Ames, who sits down near the end of his life to write a letter to his young son. Late in the novel, Rev. Ames records a conversation about Heaven, which he has with his lifelong friend Rev. John Boughton. He writes:

Boughton says he has more ideas about heaven every day. He said, “Mainly I just think about the splendors of the world and multiply by two. I’d multiply by 10 or 12 if I had the energy. But two is much more than sufficient for my purposes.” So he’s just sitting there multiplying the feel of the wind by two, multiplying the smell of the grass by two. (Boughton) said, “I remember when we put that old wagon on the courthouse roof . . . Seems to me the stars were brighter in those days. Twice as bright.

“And we were twice as clever.” “Oh, more than that,” he said. “Much more than that.” (p. 147)

Heaven is the splendors of the world multiplied by two. What if these words had been shared by Ames and Boughton from their pulpits and not just in private diaries? What if these well-kept secrets were displayed for all to see and hear? How would you feel if your preacher had a grasp on the grandeur and beauty of heaven as simple and pure as this? Is heaven really just a “times two” experience of life’s splendor?

Peter Hawkins is a Dante Scholar. In the Beecher Lectures, Peter points to Dante’s daring and clear writing on Paradise found in *Commedia* and *Paradiso*. In the creative imagination of a genius at work, Dante took his readers to heaven. He engaged the imagination of what humans have hoped for, what mystics have envisioned, and what best selling authors today cash in on in books like, *The Five People We Meet in Heaven*. Dante gave his readers “hope.”

Heaven is “hope” in life better than and beyond our human suffering and imagination. When all is said and done, visions of heaven are the hope of dreams fulfilled. Sitting at the bedside of dying persons, I have so often been led to hope by the visions of those knocking at heaven’s door. Some of your spouses, your parents, your friends have met me on the edge of Paradise with eyes of wonder, with the gentle touch of angels, and with the spirit of Pilgrims on a journey to a land so foreign and yet, so familiar, that they speak as though they know this place and they have been there before. Like Dorothy clicking their heels together in the ruby shoes, they come to realize, “There is no place like home.”

The power of the Risen Christ whom we celebrate today is not that of one returned in extraordinary form. He returned looking much the same as he was when a Jewish peasant rabbi and teacher

in Galilee. His resurrection power came not from floating above the earth like an ethereal being, but from cooking breakfast on the shores of the Galilean Sea for his friends who were out fishing. As the Risen Christ, scripture tells us he walked and talked with them; laughed and played with them. He was as real “Risen” as he had been before his bloody crucifixion.

In his Beecher Lectures published as *Telling the Truth*, Frederick Buechner speaks of the afterlife as if we should imagine ourselves in fairy tales - or better, in Shakespeare’s late romances - when defenses are down, when we caught by surprise and thus we are able to catch a fleeting glimpse of joy so deep that it is “as poignant as grief.” When that glimpse comes, perhaps in a miraculous reunion, or at a reconciliation that by all rights should never have happened, there is “a catch of the breath,” and “the beating and lifting of the heart.” It is at times like this, we realize that the profoundest loss has become the treasure we’d despaired of ever finding, the secret path to home. Buechner writes, “*Who knows when or how it will be that something easters up out of the dimness to remind us of a time before we were born and after we will die?*”(Quoted in Hawkins’ Beecher Lecture, p. 22).

When crucified on Calvary, there was no assurance that Jesus was heavenward bound. As he gave up the ghost and commended his spirit into the hands of God, hope was no more. Darkness settled upon the whole earth.

But ours is a faith in “Nevertheless!” If you read on past the darkness of Friday to the sunrise on Sunday, you can hear him speaking to Mary all over again. “*Mary . . . do not hold on to me . . . I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*” You hear that hope is back!

So, what is heaven like?

Remember Gilead's aging preachers talking near the end of their lives in a living room in which they had spent a lifetime conversing . . . *Heaven is like "the splendors of the world multiplied by two . . . but, Oh, more than that, (it is) much, much more than that."* Amen.