

*An Easter sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013, dedicated to the blessed memory of all in my family who entered the kingdom of Heaven, and always to the glory of God!*

# **“The Kingdom of Heaven is Yours!”**

**John 20:1-18; Matthew 5:1-13**

***(The final sermon in the series  
“Blessed Are You!”)***

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

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Jesus proclaims to us that “the Kingdom of Heaven is ours!” It is his promise to those who step into and live into the Beatitudes. With thoughts of the kingdom of Heaven, many of us see visions of Heaven. Our minds are drawn to reflections of Eternal Life because at some point or another every one of us comes face to face with our mortality and our crossing over to Heaven. Heaven is never far away. There is a “thin veil” between earth and heaven.

In his recently released and best-selling book, *My Proof of Heaven*, Dr. Eben Alexander writes about his near-death experience that brought him in contact with the eternal. Dr. Alexander writes:

*As a neurosurgeon, I did not believe in the phenomenon of near-death experiences. I grew up in a scientific world, the son of a neurosurgeon. I followed my father’s path and became an academic neurosurgeon, teaching at Harvard Medical School and other*

universities. I understand what happens to the brain when people are near death, and I had always believed there were good scientific explanations for the heavenly out-of-body journeys described by those who narrowly escaped death.

The brain is an astonishingly sophisticated but extremely delicate mechanism. Reduce the amount of oxygen it receives by the smallest amount and it will react. It was no big surprise that people who had undergone severe trauma would return from their experiences with strange stories. But that didn't mean they had journeyed anywhere real.

Although I considered myself a faithful Christian, I was so more in name than in actual belief. I didn't begrudge those who wanted to believe that Jesus was more than simply a good man who had suffered at the hands of the world. I sympathized deeply with those who wanted to believe that there was a God somewhere out there who loved us unconditionally. In fact, I envied such people the security that those beliefs no doubt provided. **But as a scientist, I simply knew better than to believe them myself.**

In the fall of 2008, however, after seven days in a coma during which the human part of my brain, the neocortex, was inactivated, I experienced something so profound that it gave me a scientific reason to believe in consciousness after death. (Newsweek, October 6, 2012.)

Dr. Alexander had an incredible experience in which (among many other things) he saw huge creatures which he would later refer to as angels, soaring vistas of glorious beauty, and then he encountered the powerful presence of a woman. The woman spoke to him with a complete and powerful love which he had never experienced before and never since. In his words:

*Her message had three parts, and if I had to translate them into earthly language, I'd say they ran something like this:*

***“You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.”***

***“You have nothing to fear.”***

***“There is nothing you can do wrong.”***

*The message flooded me with a vast and crazy sensation of relief. It was like being handed the rules to a game I'd been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it.*

Also, before he returned from the edge of death, Dr. Alexander became powerfully aware that modern physics is right. In his words:

*Modern physics tells us that the universe is a unity—that it is undivided. Though we seem to live in a world of separation and difference, physics tells us that beneath the surface, every object and event in the universe is completely woven up with every other object and event. There is no true separation.*

*Before my experience these ideas were abstractions. Today they are realities. Not only is the universe defined by unity, it is also—I now know—**defined by love**. The universe as I experienced it in my coma is—I have come to see with both shock and joy—the same one that both Einstein and Jesus were speaking of in their (very) different ways.*

Through this near-death experience by a once brain-dead neurosurgeon we are reintroduced to the depth and meaning of life. Through the rational, scientific mind of Dr. Alexander, we are given clear insight of the realm of God's love and God's presence in the universe. He sees Heaven in this vision from the edge of death.

So, we rediscover through Dr. Alexander (because others have experienced this before him) that we live in a universe defined by **unity**. It is a universe defined by **love**. We are shown three powerful and prevailing thoughts: **"You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever."** **"You have nothing to fear."** **"There is nothing you can do wrong (because of my love for you)."**

But, sadly, we have created a world defined by separation not unity. Ours is a world lacking in unconditional love – one that has taken all the beauty, all the perfection and the love that God has shown us and yielded to the least common denominators of fear, distrust and blame. Heaven seems such a distant reality from earth.

When Jesus taught the Beatitudes, when he rose from the dead, when he preached, when he healed, when he did justice, when he loved completely – through all of this and more - he was showing us the way to the kingdom of Heaven. But his modeling the kingdom was really done for this side of Heaven. He was showing us how to live life on earth not how to live eternally. Heaven is fine. It is earth and all the inhabitants here that God is so troubled by.

In the provocative words of Father John Dominic Crossan:

*Heaven's in great shape. Earth is where the problems are. That's why we pray for the coming of God's kingdom on Earth (in the Lord's Prayer). Jesus tells us to say, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' So, what did this phrase mean? Well, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as both present and future. Its present meaning seems to be a power or presence and community that you can experience now. But it is also spoken of as future, as something not yet here but still to come.*

*The crucial realization for seeing what the kingdom of God meant in the teaching of Jesus is the realization that in the world of Jesus, kingdom was a political term. Kingdom of God was a political metaphor, for there were other kingdoms in the time of Jesus, other kingdoms that Jesus' hearers lived under. There was the kingdom of Herod. There was the kingdom of Caesar. Jesus' hearers knew what those kingdoms were like, and here was Jesus talking about the kingdom of God. Thus, it is not simply a political metaphor but what has been called a theo-political metaphor. Theo, of course, is from the Greek word for God. The kingdom of God combines religion and politics. God and politics.” (quoted in Marcus Borg’s sermon at Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, TN., 2/26/12).*

I know, you all thought you could simply walk away from this stuff at least one day a year. “Don’t bother us with this today, Rev Ahrens! Don’t mention God and politics. It’s Easter after all!” you say. I am not bugging you about it. Jesus is! He wants you to see, to hear, to live into the truth about the kingdom of Heaven, which he wants you to enter into!

**So what IS “the kingdom of Heaven?”** (or the “kingdom of God” as the other Gospel writers call it). Very simply, it is what life would be like on earth if God were king, and those other guys weren't. If God were king and Herod were not; if God were king and Caesar were not. If God were king and fill in the blank of present day leaders were not.

The kingdom of Heaven (or God) is what the world would be like if God came to earth and was in charge. It is everything. It is how we organize our lives and our relationships. It is how we live life differently as people of faith.

The kingdom of Heaven is somewhat enigmatic. Jesus intends it not to be obvious, but to be intriguing. He used everyday scenarios and stories to define the kingdom of God – like a man with two sons, like a Good Samaritan helping a fallen and sworn enemy, like a woman making bread, like a farmer planting seeds. He does this to engage our vision of right relationships and feed our imagination to see the world differently, like an unopened treasure.

But at the heart of the message is this simple truth that the kingdom of Heaven is about all our relationships with people and the environment here on earth. It is how we are interconnected with God and with one another. It is about the network of relationships we have that point us toward God's light and love. It is about unity.

So is it true that Dr. Alexander went to the edge of heaven and witnessed first-hand what Jesus was teaching all the time about how we should live on earth.

How do I know? Because on this day, Jesus happened to rise from the dead to put on exclamation point on his life in this world. The dead Messiah comes back to life as the Risen Savior of the World! The only beloved son of God rises in glory, in truth and power at the break of dawn and meets his weeping disciple, Mary Magdalene in the garden. He convinces her, through the blur of her tears, that he is the Christ, her friend, her “rabbi,” her teacher. He returns to embrace unity, friendship and love as the teacher that he

is. He embodies all of the kingdom of Heaven values in his rising! He becomes the embodiment of the Beatitudes in his rising.

We are called by God, in Jesus Christ, to do some rising ourselves. Some of you thought it was hard to get out of bed this morning – try rising from the grave! That’s what Jesus did this morning!

Rise up – people of God! Occupy the kingdom of Heaven! Occupy the realm of God’s truth. Don’t sit around lamenting that your team didn’t make the Final Four or you didn’t win the lottery or even more significantly – don’t collapse into whatever real, life-threatening and deep pain you face in the hardship of your life! Rise! Rejoice! Be glad! Rejoice and be a resurrection people who have been given the master teaching of how do live by the Master of the Universe – even Jesus the Christ!

Near the end of his book, Dr. Alexander writes about how hard it was to convince people he wasn’t crazy. His scientific friends and colleagues thought he had gone off the deep end. In one place he found acceptance. He writes:

*One of the few places I didn’t have trouble getting my story across was a place I’d seen fairly little of before my experience: church. The first time I entered a church after my coma, I saw everything with fresh eyes. The colors of the stained-glass windows recalled the luminous beauty of the landscapes I’d seen in the world above. The deep bass notes of the organ reminded me of how thoughts and emotions in that world are like waves that move through you. And, most important, a painting of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples evoked the message that lay at the very heart of my journey: that we are loved and accepted unconditionally by a God even more grand and unfathomably glorious than the one I’d learned of as a child in Sunday school.*

**(You see- we are in the very place which must be the place of acceptance and love for all people. May God bless us to be that place for everyone in Columbus and beyond! Let’s start**

**with everyone in this room - come to Christ's table of love and grace today!) ....**

**Now back to Dr. Alexander's concluding thoughts. He concludes:**

*Today many believe that the living spiritual truths of religion have lost their power, and that science, not faith, is the road to truth. Before my experience I strongly suspected that this was the case myself.*

*But I now understand that such a view is far too simple. The plain fact is that the materialist picture of the body and brain as the producers, rather than the vehicles, of human consciousness is doomed. In its place a new view of mind and body will emerge, and in fact is emerging already. This view is scientific and spiritual in equal measure and will value what the greatest scientists of history themselves always valued above all: **truth.** (Newsweek, 10/6/12)*

Here is the truth – a truth as clear as it can be on Easter Sunday! In Jesus Christ, you are loved and accepted unconditionally. In Jesus Christ you are given the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. The kingdom of Heaven is yours! Blessed are you! Amen.

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