

Will I Ever See My Loved Ones Again?©

July 2, 2017

Rev. Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Today's sermon is the third in the series of what we believe. Or, more specifically, it is in response to the questions you wrote a few Sunday's ago about what you might have doubts about – regarding the faith – about what you aren't sure you believe.

Several of you wrote that you question whether or not we will see our loved ones again in heaven. Today, we will look at several Scriptures that might point us in the direction of that hope. But first, let's stand and say together the affirmation of faith we often say – one that was written so long ago by people who were strong in their faith. **The Apostles' Creed:**
You may be seated.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

I think that last paragraph of the Apostles' Creed says a lot about what our forefathers believed regarding the church and what happens when we die. We are saying that we believe in the Holy Ghost – or today we tend to say Holy Spirit. We don't like ghosts very much, not even a "God Ghost," I guess.

I think believing in the Holy Spirit says a great deal about how we can be open to believing many other things in the faith. If we truly believe there is God's spirit with us, a powerful force that guides us and opens our minds and hearts to truth, then it is not so difficult to believe the other things of faith.

There are plenty of Scriptures that refer to the Holy Spirit, and Jesus himself promised He would come. He would bring power to believers; he would be an advocate for sinners in the judgement; He would be a comforter in times of trouble, he would be an encourager when we are discouraged and he would illuminate the Word of God so we would be able to interpret and understand.

But as we continue on, looking at that last paragraph of the Apostles Creed, we see some other things there.

I believe in the holy catholic church – that is the church universal; the church everywhere. That means the church that we see, and the church that we do not see. Does that mean the church in other countries, where we don't see the congregation but we connect with them?

Yes, it does. But it also means the church that exists with those who have gone before us. Those believers who have died and are living with God in that place where Jesus says, in John 14, that he will prepare for us.

He tells the disciples, and us, that in the Father's house are many rooms, or dwelling places, and that he is preparing a place there for all of us – his friends. His disciples. To me, that paints a picture of a big place with lots of people around.

And then we say we believe in the *communion of saints*. What does that mean to you? Are we talking about the saints taking communion – as in the Lord's Supper? I do think there is that image of us all around the table. But the word *communion* is more than that. To *commune* means to come together, to have something in common, to be in fellowship together.

The term *the communion of saints*, is a belief that all believers – those living and those who have passed to the life eternal – who are all part of that holy catholic church – are all in fellowship together. That includes us here today, along with many others, both living on earth and living in heaven.

Paul writes in Hebrews 12:1-2:

12Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

I love that image of being surrounded and cheered on by the saints who have gone before us. “We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.” They are there, watching and cheering and helping us to persevere through our difficult times in life.

Can't you just imagine lots of loved ones – people who have passed – sitting in bleachers on the clouds, some sitting on the edge of the clouds with their feet dangling off, shouting, “Go! Keep going! Way to persevere, Fred! Hang in there! Don't give up. You got this!”

Okay, it's probably not really quite like that, but you would agree that I do have a good imagination, right? The point is, Paul indicates that there are those in heaven who love us and who are cheering us on as we continue our journey in this life.

Another part of that last paragraph in the Apostles' Creed is that we believe *in the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*.

That last part of Hebrews 12, that talks about the great cloud of witnesses, says that as we run the race of life we are: *²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

In spite of the terrible suffering that Jesus went through on the cross, he endured the cross with joy. How could that be? Because it was his joyful, loving purpose of coming into our human world – to die for us that we might have forgiveness of our sins and that we would have life everlasting.

And we say we believe in *the resurrection of the body*. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that at the last day, when Jesus returns to earth to finally establish the great Kingdom, that all those who

have died will be raised and will have a new, heavenly body. And that those who are living will be changed. Transformed.

But does that mean we just sleep in the grave until Jesus returns? I think the Bible indicates that that is not the way it will be. Remember when Jesus was hanging on the cross with a thief on crosses on each side of him. One was mocking him, but the other said: ⁴²‘Jesus, remember me) when you come into your kingdom.’ ⁴³He (Jesus replied,) ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’ (Luke 23)

Today. Not someday when I return, but today. And we know that the risen Christ appeared to the disciples and, Scripture tells us he appeared over 500 times before his ascension. And they recognized him. He was different in his spiritual body but he was himself. In fact, John tells us that he cooked breakfast for the disciples and ate with them to show them he was still himself, although there were no barriers that kept him shut out anymore. (John 21)

Paul writes to the church in Philippi: (Philippians 3:20-21)

²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

To me, citizenship says we are one of many citizens in a place called heaven. And it seems that Scripture is indicating that we will have some kind of spiritual body that is suited for that heavenly home. That someday we will have our final bodies – changed for the permanent Kingdom of God that Jesus will establish and that we will be part of forever.

Now, is all of this literally, exactly the way it will be? All I can give you is what we find in the Bible – the Word of God. And John says *“all these things are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you will have life by the power of his name.”*

The truth is that we are not given an exact description of what happens when we die or whether or not we will see our loved ones and recognize them. But I think there are truths here in Scripture that can give us encouragement to believe we will.

If Jesus prepares a place for us – all of us – why would we not be there and know each other? If we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who are cheering us on, why would we not know each other in the kingdom? If we are citizens together in that heavenly home, why would we not have knowledge of who we are.

I have this personal belief that we are given certain people in our lives here on earth and that those will be our special spiritual people to be with in heaven. We probably won’t be mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers but a great family of people praising God and living in glory. I often think that, in heaven, my mother and I will talk and I will say, “Remember that time, when you were my mama ...?”

It's not all clear cut for us. That's a great part of the mystery of God and of our faith. It is a principle in faith that we hope for and hold as a belief but I have a feeling that whatever we imagine right here in this life, can't even compare with how it will really be when we are finally there. And I think if it isn't how we imagine it, we won't care then, because it will be so glorious and perfect.

We do have those accounts from others who have had near death experiences – people who have died but been brought back – who testify that they saw a great light; or they saw Jesus or some say they saw a loved one there, telling them it isn't time yet.

And I have walked with people on their journey from this life to the next, as they were dying, many of whom tell me their parents or grandparents or spouse – different people sometimes, came to them and talked with them. I have had that report over and over again.

And our prayers in the funeral liturgy from our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship pray with the great hope and faith that we will be united with our loved ones.

I close this sermon with one of those prayers:

God of all consolation, our refuge and strength in sorrow, by dying, our Lord Jesus Christ conquered death; by rising from the grave he restored us to life. Enable us to go forward in faith to meet him, that when our life on earth is ended, we may be united with all who love him in your heavenly kingdom, where every tear will be wiped away; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

© Copyright 2017. All Rights Reserved.