

“IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
November 4, 2012

All Saints’ Sunday

John 14:1-7

Rev. 21:1-7

As most of you know, I love to read. I’ve always got several books going at the same time, I read a couple of newspapers every morning, and I’ve got more than my share of magazine subscriptions. One of the magazines to which I subscribe is Newsweek. I think I’ve had that subscription for over 25 years.

Newsweek is one of those magazines, like Time and others, who try to grab you from the first moment you catch a glimpse of the cover every week. Their covers are somewhat like a good sermon title - whose aim is to make you curious enough to want to hear it. A good magazine cover makes you want to open it up and read it!

As you can imagine, with an election coming up in just a couple of days, the covers have been very intriguing of late. Which made a recent cover somewhat surprising. A couple of weeks ago, Newsweek’s cover was not at all about politics or the election or anything like that. This is what the cover said: “Heaven is Real.”

Well, the cover worked! I couldn’t wait to open the magazine and read the article. And was it ever amazing! It was the story of a neurosurgeon who had a near-death experience.

Let me tell you about it. His name is Dr. Eben Alexander, and he is a neurosurgeon, who, among other things, has taught at Harvard University. So obviously he is an accomplished and well-respected man. Well, one day, four years ago, he woke up with a horrendous headache, and within hours, found himself in the emergency room of the hospital in which he worked, on death’s doorstep. He was diagnosed with a severe case of bacterial meningitis, and within a short period of time from when he was admitted, he sank into a week-long coma.

And during that time, he had his own near-death experience. Before he told his story in this article, he admitted that he had heard many near-death experience stories before, and had largely pooh-poohed them, seeing them as some psycho-physical, scientific phenomenon - something that the brain did. He saw them through the eyes of a scientist, until it happened to him.

And what happened to him was that he found himself in the most beautiful,

serene, wonderful place he had ever been. The colors were comforting, the aura peaceful yet stimulating. There was incredible, deep darkness yet an incredible light shone through it. He was greeted by beings, beautiful beings, and by one beautiful, guiding being in particular. It was a holy, beautiful, transforming journey.

He has a hard time putting it into words - just how wonderful it was - but he said in the article that through it he heard a very clear message, and it was this: "You are loved and cherished, dearly forever; you have nothing to fear; and there is nothing you can do wrong." It was like he was wrapped in the arms of unconditional love and acceptance - like he was wrapped in a cocoon of love.

When he awoke from the coma, he began to tell others about it. And he was disappointed by some of the reaction to his story. These are his words: "I know full well how extraordinary, how frankly unbelievable, all this sounds. Had someone - even a doctor - told me a story like this in the old days, I would have been quite certain that they were under the spell of some delusion. But what happened to me was, far from being delusional, as real or more real than any event in my life. That includes my wedding day and the birth of my two sons."

Like I said, some people had trouble believing his story. But, Alexander says, one of the few places that he didn't have trouble getting his story across was at church. He admits that, as a scientific, rational man, before his illness, he rarely darkened the door of a church.

But afterwards he did, and this is what happened to him. "The first time I entered a church after my coma (he writes), 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." (Dr. Eben Alexander, "Heaven is Real," Newsweek, October, 2012)

My dear friends, today, on this All Saints' Sunday, I invite all of us to remember that those ten people whose names are listed in our bulletin this morning - those ten members of our church family who passed away this year - and so many others in your lives who died - all of them are today, in the arms of that grand and unfathomably glorious God, in that grand and unfathomably glorious place Eben Alexander described. A place where they have been welcomed home by the God who created them, who gave them to us for a time. A place where they know first-hand now what Dr. Alexander learned - that they are loved and cherished

dearly forever, they have nothing to fear, and there is nothing they can do wrong.

It is that place that John described in the Book of Revelation - a place of comfort, peace, wholeness; a place where there is no more pain, no more sorrow, no more tears. They have received the gift that Jesus promised as he spoke to his disciples - a place prepared just for them in his Father's house.

So while we mourn their loss, and miss their presence with us, we rejoice for them that they are in that wonderful place. We rejoice that for them, all is well. We rejoice that they have been enveloped in the arms of God's overwhelming love and grace - and it is all good, so good.

Today, as we gather at the table of our Lord for the breaking of the bread and sharing the cup, we remember that they sit at table with Him in heaven. These dear ones we have loved - Walter, Virginia, Marjorie, Billie, Catherine, Agnes, Camy, Frank, Margaret and Marge - are in the Father's house at the heavenly banquet poured out for them.

We miss them terribly. They were our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, grandfathers, grandmothers and more. They served by us, sang with us, laughed with us, cried with us. They were homemakers, secretaries, senators, gardeners, dancers, singers. They were special and they were loved and we are all the better for having had them in our lives. They will never be forgotten.

With overwhelming gratitude to the God who gave them to us, we remember them especially this day, and give God thanks that He has given them a place - a wonderful, loving, grace-filled place in His house - for all the days to come. We look to that day when we will see them once more.

With a mixture of sadness over their passing, and joy over their new life in heaven, we remember now, with a special presentation, those in our church family who have gone to be with God this past year.