

Sermon 14 October 2018 'Proof of Heaven.'

John 14:1-6

'There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you.' This has to be one of my most favourite verses in the Bible, for the simple reason that Jesus is stating quite categorically that there is a life for us when we move on from life here on earth. That, I find, fills me with great hope and is a source of huge comfort. However, it also poses quite a challenge. I will come back to that a little later.

There are two points that can be drawn from this verse. The first I have already mentioned – there is a heaven. The second is this, it is a spiritual life. Why do I say that, and what are the implications of that? Jesus insinuates that there is unlimited space. A house here on earth, no matter how big, at some point will become full. But spirits don't take up any space at all, so there is unlimited room.

The implication of this is that we don't really understand what this spiritual life is like. Our experience and, therefore, our knowledge is restricted to the world of the physical. Not only do we not understand this spiritual life, it also means we cannot prove anything about it. That, of course, is what faith is – believing in something one cannot verify. What we can do is share experiences, whether they be ours or those of other people, and we can share our personal beliefs.

That brings me to a book I want to share with you, the title of which is the title of our service today, 'Proof of Heaven', written by Dr Eben Alexander. Dr Alexander was a highly trained neurosurgeon who had an NDE, a near-death experience. His brain was attacked by a rare illness and the part of the brain that controls thought and emotion shut down completely. He was in a coma for a week; his family had been summoned to say their last farewells and all of a sudden he woke up, much to everyone's complete amazement.

During his coma, he experienced the presence of a supernatural Being, which he came to understand was God. This Being was like a living orb that gave out a brilliant light. This in itself is interesting because common to almost every NDE is the experience of a very bright and warm light.

A very important element of this experience was the feeling of unconditional love. I quote from his book, 'The unconditional love and acceptance that I experienced on my journey is the single most important discovery I have ever made, or will make, and as hard as I know it's going to be to unpack the other lessons I learned while there, I also know in my heart that sharing this very basic message – one so simple that most children readily accept it – is the most important task I have'.

Now, as we know, the basis of the message Jesus brings to us from God is one of unconditional love. So surely, this is further proof of God's presence in Dr Ebert's experience.

The book contains many stories and observations, which all point towards the existence of something very real beyond the bounds of our physical life. Let me share one of those.

About two years after his experience, Dr Ebert visited a close friend, John, who chaired one of the foremost neuroscience departments in the world. He shared some of his story with John and his response was to look quite amazed, as though something was falling into place. It turned out that about a year earlier John's father was nearing the end of a long illness. He wanted to die. His father begged him to give him some pills or something that would put an end to his suffering. And then quite suddenly his father became very lucid, and he began talking to someone who appeared to be situated at the foot of his bed, though there was

actually no one there. John soon realised his father was talking to his deceased mother, who had died sixty-five years ago when his father was just a teenager. His father had rarely spoken about her but he now was having a joyous and animated conversation with her. John was absolutely convinced her spirit was there, welcoming his father's spirit home.

After a few minutes, John's father turned back to him, a completely different look in his eye. He was smiling and very much at peace. A short time later his father closed his eyes for the last time and slipped away.

John felt that the encounter between his father and his departed grandmother was very real, but he had not known what to do with it because, as a doctor, he knew such things were not really meant to happen. When Dr Ebert shared his experience with him, it gave credence to his own experience with his father.

Dr Ebert's journey through the spiritual after-life led him to another journey, the journey from a skeptic to a believer, from one who questioned to someone whose many questions were answered.

There are countless people who have made similar journeys. Let me refer you to a very well-known person who made such a journey. Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross of the University of Chicago worked with terminally-ill people. She spent many hours with people as they died, not just from disease but also from accidents, and through her experiences she became convinced there is life after death. She wrote a wonderful book, 'On Death and Dying', amongst other books.

She relates a number of anecdotes. There was the story of the young boy who, along with his family, were involved in a car accident. As she sat with the boy in the hospital, he said with great calm, 'Everything is ok now. My mummy and Peter are already waiting for me.' Peter was his brother. She knew his mother was killed at the scene of the accident, though he wouldn't have been aware of that. She also knew that Peter had been sent to another hospital that specialised in burns. A short time later as she left the Intensive Care Unit, a nurse beckoned her and said, 'We have a message for you from the Burns Unit. Peter died ten minutes ago.' She found herself answering, 'Yes, I know.'

Dr Kubler-Ross's experiences were enough to turn her into a believer. I cannot prove anything to you but I can share the experiences of others and I can share with you my belief. That belief naturally has its bedrock in the Bible and let me quote from our first reading, 'For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down – when we die and leave these bodies – we will have a home in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands.' *2 Corinthians 5:1*.

As we contemplate our inevitable mortality, we yearn for hope. Those words and the words of Jesus as expressed in John 14:1 give us that hope. The experiences of people such as Dr Eben Alexander and Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross give us hope.

Finally, I mentioned at the beginning that the concept of heaven does present a challenge. That is really for another sermon. Suffice to say, the challenge for me, for us all, is to ensure we do actually gain admittance when the time comes. Paul tells us that we are going to be judged. 'For we must stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies.' *2 Corinthians 5:10*. My challenge is to conduct myself in this life in such a way that when I arrive at the pearly gates, the good Lord will hopefully say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come on in.' The alternative is not worth contemplating.