

Sermon 12 December 2021 Proof of Heaven

John 14:1-6

'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?' This has to be one of my favourite verses in the Bible, for the simple reason that Jesus is stating quite categorically that there is 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.

There are two points that can be drawn from this verse. The first I have already mentioned – there is a heaven. Jesus makes that quite clear.

The second is this – it is a spiritual life. Why do I say that in the context of this particular verse, and what are the implications of this? 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.

Now here's the thing - 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 we 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, a book I have referred to previously. The title of the book is 'Proof of Heaven' and it is written by Dr Eben Alexander. Dr Alexander was a highly trained neurosurgeon who had a 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 his bedside to say their last farewells and all of a sudden he woke up, much to everyone's 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.

This book contains many stories and observations, which all point towards the existence of something very real beyond the bounds of our physical life. Time precludes me from sharing some of these with you.

Dr Ebert's journey through the spiritual after-life led him to another journey, the journey from a sceptic to a believer, from one who questioned to one whose 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 severely-injured boy in hospital, he said with great calm, 'Everything is ok now. My mummy and Peter are already waiting for me in heaven.' Peter was his brother. She knew his mother was killed at the scene of the accident, though the little boy wouldn't have been aware of that. She also knew that his brother, 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 2 Corinthians 5:1 – *'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.'*

As we contemplate our inevitable mortality, we yearn for hope. Those words and the words of Jesus as expressed in John 14 give us hope. The experience of people such as Dr Eben Alexander and Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross give us hope. My faith gives me hope.

Reverend Warner Wilder