

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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John 14:1-3
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

A CREDIBLE CREED?: THE LIFE EVERLASTING

She was only twenty-four years old when she died. Her parents had gone abroad, and while they were gone, she contracted meningitis. After Susy's death in August of 1896, her famous father, Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, raged at everyone near and far. And in particular, he raged at God. Twain, who had been raised in a Missouri Presbyterian home, attended a Congregational church in Hartford, Connecticut, and counted a minister as one of his best friends. But his daughter's death seemed to knock the props of his religious beliefs out from under him. In one of his private notebooks after Susy's death, he writes, "God's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn." And in his final unpublished novella, No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger, Twain's main character asserts that "there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!"¹

On one level, we can understand the pain that led to such despair. Three of Twain's four children died before he did. Some of you have experienced that kind of pain and loss. In the midst of grief, we long for hope of some kind. But is it just wishful thinking that there is the possibility, the promise of life everlasting for our loved ones and for ourselves? Today, we conclude this series of sermons on the last set of affirmations in the Apostles' Creed with a focus on the phrase, "I believe in the life everlasting."

Initial thoughts include the idea that life everlasting might not be such a good thing. I remember certain lectures, even in seminary, where it felt like the class was going on forever, and I was bored out of my wits. I won't ask whether you've ever heard a sermon that put you in a similar frame of mind. Life everlasting that lacks compelling purpose and fulfillment, that lacks liveliness, is not of an interest to me. If every day were the same, would that not just be interminable monotony?

But haven't we also had days that we wished would never end? Something so gripping connected us to God's created beauty and rich meaning or deep community, that we wanted the experience to go on and on. Perhaps it was in the context of a romance or meaningful work or an encounter with nature that was such an enrichment that you felt filled with life. Think of the delight of a child who is enjoying some experience so much and he or she wants someone else to also experience it, as the child calls out, "Look what I'm doing!" That is the everlasting joy that scripture promises us beyond this life.

But we can also begin to experience that richness of life before we die. Part of that everlasting life of rich purpose and experience needn't wait for heaven to come about. We can have such a gift from God as we live in the fullness of God's love that spills over into our relationships with others of God's children. It's alright to long for that in this life and in a life beyond this one. Exploring that, I invite you to think about the One who is not limited by time. Think about the One who is so full of life that the gift has been shared with all of the creatures of this planet. Think about the One whose life is not limited by mortality or the ravages of aging. It would take a life everlasting to begin to experience the richness of God's love and vitality. In such an encounter, there would be no anxiety or fear, no pain or tears, no problems and frustrations like we have known. There would be deep peace and a fullness of joy.

I don't know of anyone who can prove that some ongoing existence like this remains for us after we expire. But I have that as a deep hope. Logic, science, or cynicism might try to drag us away from such a hope. But there is reason to believe. There are assurances that come to us in scripture. There is encouragement that the church has held onto such a belief for two millennia.

But ultimately, my belief in eternal life, my hope for life beyond this life, has to do with my belief in our God. And it has to do with the incarnation, the ministry, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus, who we call God's Son and the Christ. God's existence is beyond the grasp of my understanding, beyond what any of us with our current senses can see and touch, and even beyond what we can deduce or reason. Yet with that belief in the nature of the God we do believe in, One who is kind and loving, who is more powerful than anything that kills and destroys, comes an accompanying reasonable belief that God can take us beyond our limited, fallible, earthly frame of existence.

If indeed God abides in some existence beyond sight and understanding, and if Jesus, an individual human being, was raised to that existence, then I have hope in some kind of resurrection for us. This does not mean that we are immortal. I see much that indicates we are not. I'm confident that we have no power over death on our own. Scripture does not give us much of an understanding about what heaven will actually be like or where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. Is heaven in some dimension beyond our perception? That makes sense to me, but I don't know.

And I don't have to know in order to believe in the life everlasting. I hold onto that hope, because I believe in the reality, and the power, and the presence of our Almighty God, the One who abides with and beyond creation, the One who stands outside of time and space, as we know it, and yet the One who has come alongside us, who has spoken to us in the still, small voice, who has amazed us with mighty acts we could not explain, who has kept and carried us all our days, who is revealed in a human named Jesus, who has forgiven us and redeemed us, who has called us to worship and to service, who has refused to let us go, even when we rebel and run the other way.

I understand the inclination to shrink into cynical despair when grief strikes, that all meaning is an illusion and that the eternities beyond us are utterly empty. And I understand the possibility that a belief in everlasting life could just be simplistic insulation from the harsh realities of life and death. But I am heartened by the nature of God's heart.

Many of you are familiar with the serenity prayer, written by the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Some may not have heard the remainder of that prayer, which then says, "Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next."²

Friends, when we believe in a God who can answer this kind of prayer, then we can believe in and be shaped by hope in the life everlasting. Amen.

¹ information about Mark Twain's struggles after his daughter's death based on this blog:
<http://seanmichaellucas.blogspot.com/2006/12/so-we-do-not-lose-heart-2-corinthians.html>

² http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity_prayer/