

Let's talk about heaven. Why? Well, why not? I'm a little tired of talking about betrayal and crucifixion and death, aren't you? Jesus has been raised from the dead, he has opened the gates of heaven, so it seems a good idea to ask what that means exactly. The Jesus of today's gospel seems in between earth and heaven, doesn't he? He breaks the laws of nature and obeys them too. He appears from nowhere, yet has a physical reality that can be touched. He can still enjoy a good fish dinner! What does this portend for us?

If I were to ask you good Christians what we know about heaven, I would expect that most of you would (eventually) come to the famous quote from St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor 2:9) Be honest. Don't you find that a little unsatisfying? It's like Christmas Eve, with a big present with your name on it under the tree, and your Mom says, "No, you can't open it until tomorrow." So what happens when she leaves the room? You go over to that box and give it a good shake. So, what do you say we shake that box labelled "heaven"?

First question, is heaven a place? The biblical references infer that it is, but clearly not in the sense of an undiscovered island in the Pacific Ocean. Heaven seems to be an alternate reality, open to everyone on earth who dies and passes judgment. One certainty is that heaven will be recognizable to us, which further implies that it will be similar to our current existence on earth. Remember that God created the world and found it very, very good. Why would he throw that away and replace it with some other existence when we die? A better explanation would be that heaven is a redeemed earth, a new earth that is not subject to the dog-eat-dog rules that plague us here. But let's not stop there – start by picturing heaven as a three dimensional reality that we are used to. Now add a fourth dimension, *eternity*. This makes all of the difference. Everything in heaven is everything on earth taken to the nth degree. Quite simply, there are no limits.

Second question, will we have bodies in heaven? Will we look like we do now? Yeah, I know. Heaven forbid! We tend to think either/or here, often falling into the trap of arbitrarily splitting body and spirit unnecessarily. Let's face it, we are physical beings, different from spirits, different from angels, different from other created things. And yes, we are also finite beings, in that each of us is going to die. So how do we reconcile this? The

Church teaches that our bodies reunite with our spirits at the “end of time”. But how? Do our atoms somehow reassemble themselves into some version of our body? But wouldn’t that mean that we are subject to all of the pain and hunger we deal with now? How is that heaven? Is there another option? Perhaps.

Look at the example of Jesus in today’s gospel. He was dead, no doubt about it, brutally crucified and run through with a spear. Now he’s alive, and he’s physical. He can be touched, and takes great pains to emphasize this point. But he is not quite the same either. He can appear and disappear at will. He’s clearly not subject to our physical laws. And, catch a key point – he still carries his wounds. What can we suppose from this? Jesus is a recognizable human being with a heavenly essence. Remember that heaven is earth taken to the nth degree. Jesus is human taken to the nth degree. He has no limits. Does that mean we become like Jesus? Partly true, yes, remembering that Jesus is also the second person of the Trinity. We will not become God when we reach heaven, sorry. But we can assume that we will have a body, we will be recognizable as ourselves to others, we will carry our body memories with us – remembered tastes, touches, sights, and sounds – and we will be unconstrained by physical limitations. We will be able to move from place to place instantly. We will be able to visit any place or time. We will be able to learn new things. We will laugh with friends, eat great food, enjoy marvelous music, and hug our kids and our pets. And best of all? We will be able to explore the infinite variety and imagination of God.

Third question – won’t we get bored? After all, eternity is well, *never-ending*. Let’s put this one to bed right now. Boredom, by definition, is weariness, a lack of enthusiasm, a lack of interest, apathy, dullness, blah. Boredom overcomes us when we are being limited, when we are stuck, sitting on a 6-hour cross-country flight. Heaven, by definition, is the exact opposite of boredom. There are no limits, boundless energy, an endless availability of experiences, senses, things to learn, seek, and understand. If you die and find ourselves bored, I suspect that you are *not* in heaven!

Fourth question – once we’re in heaven, can we directly affect people here on earth? Can we nudge people, speak to people, and oh ho, best yet, *haunt* people, especially that bully from fourth grade? Here’s a way to think about this. The only thing we take with us to heaven is love – that’s it. God is love, and love is drawn to love, so that’s all we get to bring with us. Once

we're in heaven, the love we have for people down here can be imagined as ropes made of love. The stronger that love, the more substantial the rope tying us to that person. If there's no love, there's no rope of love. So yes, I believe that we can yank on those ropes of love while we're in heaven and try to get the attention of our family and friends. Occasionally, it will actually be felt amidst the noise and clamor of earthly life. Have you ever felt that tug from a dead relative or friend? Especially a person you had a very strong bond with? Yeah, I thought so. It's also why it makes no sense to speak of haunting an enemy. The only ropes are love ropes – no love, no rope, no tugs, no haunting. Sorry – we'll leave haunting to evil spirits. That's their specialty.

So, now we've given that box marked "heaven" four good shakes. We've learned a little bit about what's inside, I think. But, are we absolutely sure we know what heaven is about now? Did we get it right? There's only one way to tell – by opening that box on Christmas morning, by opening that box as we take our last breath on earth. Oh wait, one last thing. How do we make sure there's a box named heaven waiting for us when we die? Simple. Know Christ. Know Christ, know the Father, know eternal life. Jesus could not be any more clearer than this. He is the way, he is the truth, he is the life. That means to *follow* him, to get to *know* him inside to such an extent that you see the world as He does, act in the world as He did, and be ready to answer the question he will ask you on judgment day. What is that question? Jesus will ask, "How did you live the life I gave you? How is the Kingdom of God more real because of you?" After you answer, he'll hand you a box.