

Come, Lord Jesus!
Luke 23:39-43; Acts 1:1-5, 9-11
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43, NRSV)

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:1-5, 9-11, NRSV)

Six years ago Tyndale House, an evangelical Christian publisher, released a book called *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life Beyond this World*. This book begins with the story of how six-year-old Alex Malarkey, and his father, Kevin Malarkey, were involved in a traffic accident. The accident sent the son Alex into a coma which lasted for two months. When he woke up from the coma, he had an incredible story. He said that during his coma, angels took him through the gates of heaven. He heard the music of heaven. And he met and talked with Jesus. The book sold over a million copies, was translated into Spanish, and led to a documentary DVD.

While the traffic accident and the coma were real enough, it turns out the story about Alex going to heaven was fake. About two years ago, Alex, by that time a teenager, publicly admitted he made the whole thing up. "I did not die," he said.

“I did not go to heaven. I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention.” Soon thereafter, Tyndale House stopped selling the book and all its associated products. In the summer of 2014, the Southern Baptist Convention took the step of passing a resolution warning readers to be skeptical of books written by people who claim to have died, gone to heaven, and then come back. Many of these books have “details that are antithetical to Scripture,” declared the Southern Baptist resolution.¹

This entire incident raises uncomfortable questions about what motives the Malarkey family may have had for fame and financial profit. But the question I’m more interested in this morning is this. What does the Bible actually tell us about what happens after we die? So far as I remember, I’ve never talked about this topic here at Berkey on a Sunday morning, so it’s probably high time to do it.

Perhaps the first thing to emphasize is that this is not one of the Bible’s major concerns. Quite a few Christians act like the whole point of being a Christian is going to heaven when we die. In their view the purpose of evangelism is to save souls so that those souls can float to heaven immediately after the person dies. But the Bible simply does not pay much attention to what happens when we die. Instead scripture pays vastly more attention to things like poverty and wealth, justice and peace, and covenantal fidelity. The Bible’s concerns are mostly focused on issues in this world, not on questions about the next world.

Second, we want to acknowledge that the New Testament is not as clear as we’d like it to be on what happens after death. One New Testament scholar calls the Bible’s language about the afterlife “a set of signposts pointing into the fog.” The signposts are reliable and trustworthy, but they’re only hints about a future

¹ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “The ‘Boy Who Came Back from Heaven’ Retracts Story,” *Christianity Today*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/boy-who-came-back-from-heaven-retraction.html>, accessed March 24, 2016.

which for us is still obscured by fog. Obviously we'll know more when we get into the future, for but now we have to be satisfied with these clues which do not give us a full picture.²

A third thing to underscore is that the resurrection of Jesus decisively changed the way God's people thought about life and death. No one before Jesus was resurrected. The raising of Lazarus in John 11 and the raising of the widow's son in Luke 7 were resuscitations, not true resurrections. As far as anyone knows, Lazarus and the widow's son both died again at some point later in their lives. By contrast the earliest Christians realized that in the raising of Jesus from death we have something genuinely new: a resurrection where the person never dies again but now lives perpetually. The resurrection of Jesus' body caused a paradigm shift. The early church realized that sometime in the future everyone who's in Christ will also be resurrected and given a new body. Resurrection means that in the future an eternal, embodied life will now be possible for us too. In Romans 8:23, Paul writes about "the redemption of our bodies."³ What he means is that we will have a new type of bodily existence that completes our present life. Resurrection from our graves will be like a new creation. God will give us new bodies that have some kind of continuity with our present bodies but that will simultaneously be newly made bodies. That's exactly what happened to Jesus, and because it happened to him it will also happen to us.

So far Jesus is the only person who's ever been resurrected. The resurrection of all the Christians who've ever died, as well as our own resurrections, are still waiting to happen in the future, at a time known only to God. So what happens to

² N.T. Wright, "Rethinking Life after Death," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZC6tbgpsl4>, accessed March 24, 2016.

³ From this point forward, I'm indebted to N.T. Wright, "Heaven Is Not Our Home," *Christianity Today*, March 24, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/april/13.36.html>, accessed March 24, 2016.

us in the meantime? What happens between our last breath in this body and our first breath in the resurrected body? Three and a half weeks ago I was the only family member present when my father took his last breath in the Goshen hospital. Five days later we buried his ashes in the Olive Cemetery. Based on scripture, I believe his bodily resurrection will happen someday in the future. But meanwhile, what is happening to him and to millions of other Christians who've died?

We find an important clue in Luke 23:43. In this verse Jesus assures the man hanging on the neighboring cross that "today you will be with me in Paradise." Now what does Jesus mean by "Paradise?" Paradise cannot mean the resurrection, because Jesus' own resurrection won't happen for another two days. Yet that very day, after they've both died, Jesus and the criminal will meet again in Paradise.

From these words of Jesus we get two things. First, people who die in faith immediately join Jesus in Paradise. Paul affirms this in Philippians 1:23 when he says, "my desire is to depart [this life] and be with Christ, for that is far better."

Second, what Jesus calls Paradise seemingly refers to some interim or transitional state between death and resurrection. Again, since Jesus' resurrection hasn't happened yet, Paradise has to be some pre-resurrection state of existence. Mediterranean people in the first century, and in previous centuries, would have thought of Paradise as kind of blissful garden, a restful park where the dead are refreshed in the presence of Christ as they await the dawn of resurrection. So Paradise is not our final destination, but a way station, a temporary abode.

We find support for this line of thinking in John 14:2, where Jesus tells the disciples that "in my Father's house are many dwelling-places." Some Christians think Jesus is referring here to heaven, and that he's telling us we immediately go to heaven when we die. But that's not what the Greek word for "dwelling-places" means. The Greek word *monai* means a place where you halt temporarily to rest on

a journey that takes you somewhere else. In John 14, Jesus is referring to a temporary resting place, not a permanent heaven. This temporary resting place, called Paradise in the gospel of Luke, is where we await the coming of resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Paul calls this restful state “sleeping in Christ” (1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess 4:13-15). Paradise is a place of restful sleep in the presence of Christ which lasts until God chooses to resurrect us.

What then is resurrection? Probably the best way to think of resurrection is that it's part of God's new heaven and new earth which will be given us in the future. Many people miss this, but one of the great affirmations of the book of Revelation is that sometime in the future, heaven will come to earth. Revelation 21 could not be more clear on this point. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” says John, “and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” Then “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals’” (21:1-3).

The home of God will be among mortals. In other words, the future location of heaven is right here on earth. Acts 1:11 lends support to this notion. According to the angels, Jesus will return to this earth “in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” This passage suggests that once Jesus returns to earth he's not leaving again. He's staying right here, to participate with us in the new heaven that God will create right here on a new earth.

Another way to say this is that the new heaven and new earth envisioned by Revelation will express the way creation was originally intended to function in Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 and 2 talk of a heaven and earth overlapping each other, where God and humanity walk with each other and fellowship with each other in the garden of the earth. Revelation 21 envisions that the future heaven and earth

will be very much like that. Heaven and earth will intermingle. In the new heaven and new earth, God and humanity will be in deep communion with each other. Our future lies in a marriage of heaven and earth. I for one very much look forward to my own resurrection and to living with the Triune God in this new heaven and earth. With the author of Revelation, I too say “Come, Lord Jesus!” and make it so (22:20).