

**Faith in Joining the Great Cloud of Witnesses**  
**Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church**  
**Nov. 5, 2023**

**Revelation 21:1-6a**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home<sup>[a]</sup> of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them;  
they will be his peoples,<sup>[c]</sup>  
and God himself will be with them and be their God;<sup>[d]</sup>  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for<sup>[e]</sup> the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Today we remember those who have gone before us in the faith of Jesus Christ, the Great Cloud of Witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). We give thanks for their example of faith, their encouragement of us in our faith, their hope for us in the growth of our devotion to Jesus. We remember in particular members of this congregation who have died. We remember two longtime members who finished their earthly journeys this year, Lillian White, and Margie Riley. They were two larger-than-life figures in this church. They were two faithful members who loved the Lord, and who carved their own unique paths in life and in the life of this church.

Death can be sad for those left behind. We are saddened by the absence of our friends and family who are no longer in our physical presence. The void that is left by those we love can be crushing. Sometimes it may seem too much to bear.

For those facing death, it can be scary. Death is an unknown. It is outside of our experience, and no matter how much faith we have, it's still an unknown. We can take heart in the knowledge that Jesus Christ defeated the Power of death by being raised from the dead. Donald McKim, a Presbyterian theologian, writes that “While we naturally fear death as an unknown, death holds no ultimate terror because we are secure in God’s electing and gracious love in Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald McKim, *A Brief Introduction, Presbyterian Beliefs, Revised Edition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 120.

There can be a sense of panic when death approaches suddenly. I, myself had a procedure one time and I had a terrible reaction to the drugs that were being pumped in me and I thought I was going to die. I was scared, I couldn't breathe, my whole system was overwhelmed. It seemed like death was coming too soon for me. I remember thinking, "I can't believe I'm going to go out this way, in a hospital bed." I didn't want life to be over. Not yet, is what I was thinking. Everything was happening so fast I didn't think of salvation or resurrection. I just didn't want my life to end that soon.

I have seen resignation, acceptance, and then peace when people approach death. In these instances, we have time to see it coming. Sometimes people are just tired, and they want to go home to the Lord. And going home to the Lord, the hope in the hereafter that it talks about in our New Testament lesson today, is what I want to talk about today.

So today, we remember those who have gone before us, the Great Cloud of Witnesses. And in that remembrance, we can consider what will happen to us after death. No one knows for certain, of course. I know it's not too fashionable to talk of death in our society of adoration of youth and looking younger. Ultimately, we will all die. But beyond that inevitability, we can glean some insight on what may lie ahead from our sacred scriptures, our Presbyterian Church (USA) confessions, and in the words of theologians in our Reformed Tradition. What emerges from all of this is hope, through our faith in Jesus Christ.

In Hebrews 12:1-2, the author writes that "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,<sup>[a]</sup> and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of<sup>[b]</sup> the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

In the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563, the first question of this document asks: What is your only comfort in life and in death? The answer: That I am not my own,<sup>1</sup> but belong—body and soul, in life and in death<sup>2</sup>—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,<sup>4</sup> and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.<sup>5</sup> He also watches over me in such a way<sup>6</sup> that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven;<sup>7</sup> in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.<sup>8</sup> Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life<sup>9</sup> and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.<sup>10</sup><sup>2</sup>

In our baptism, we were engrafted into the body of Christ, and we belong to him. As the confession says, because we belong to him, Christ assures us of life ever-lasting.

Fast forward to the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century confession, the Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith, which uses the same language essentially as the Heidelberg Catechism, saying, "In life and

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<sup>2</sup> PCUSA Book of Confessions, 31.

in death we belong to God.” We belong to God, our loving parent. And a loving parent never wishes anything bad to happen to their child.

When we die, we can take comfort in the fact that scripture promises us eternal lives. In 1 John 2:25, it says, “<sup>25</sup> And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.”

And what will we look like and what will this eternal life be like? Obviously, no one knows for sure. No one here has that experience. What we do have is a glimpse of what that will be like based on passages from scripture and some theologians.

As the late scholar Shirley Guthrie wrote, God raised Jesus bodily from the dead, “The same earthly Jesus his disciples had known before (to be sure with a transformed ‘new’ body) returned to the God from whom he had come.” <sup>3</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 15:35-49; Paul writes that we will have spiritual bodies at our resurrection. In 1 Corinthians he writes, “There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another” (1 Cor. 15:40). He also writes that what is raised is “imperishable.” (1 Cor. 15:42). Our bodies are raised a “spiritual body,” and he writes, “If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 44). John Calvin writes that Paul “teaches that, although we shall retain the substance of our bodies, there will be a change that its condition may be far more excellent” (*Institutes*, 3.25.8).

Calvin, the founder of the Reformed Tradition, writes a great deal about the bodily resurrection in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He acknowledges that not everyone believes in the bodily resurrection in the world. There are ministers who do not believe it, and I suspect there are some here in the sanctuary who do not believe it. And guess what? That’s OK. There is no requirement that you believe in a bodily resurrection to attend this church. In fact, what is required of membership in the Presbyterian Church? Belief in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. If you don’t believe that, you’re still welcome here in our sanctuary on Sundays to learn more and to explore what Christianity is, and what it isn’t. I want everyone to know, whatever you believe, whomever you are, you always have a safe place to worship at Faith Presbyterian.

So, Calvin acknowledges this idea of resurrection isn’t universal. He writes, “Therefore, although many of the philosophers declared souls immortal, few approved the resurrection of the flesh.” Calvin’s argument in favor of bodily resurrection is based on the resurrection stories of Jesus, and on the belief in a God whose power is beyond the capacity of our imaginations.

“Now whenever we consider the resurrection, let Christ’s image come before us. In the nature which he took from us he so completed the course of mortal life that now, having obtained immortality, he is the pledge of our coming resurrection.” (*Institutes*, 3.25.3)

“We have said that in proving the resurrection our thoughts ought to be directed to God’s boundless might. Paul briefly teaches this: ‘To change our lowly body,’ he says, ‘to be like his

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<sup>3</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 381.

glorious body, according to his power which enables him...to subject all things to himself” (Phil 3:21). The promise of resurrection “would not be so hard to believe if we paid proper attention to the miracles thrust before our eyes throughout all the regions of the world. But let us remember that no one is truly persuaded of the coming resurrection unless he is seized with wonder, and ascribes to the power of God its due glory” (*Institutes*, 3.25.4)

Our scripture lesson today says, “He will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them; they will be his peoples,<sup>[c]</sup> and God himself will be with them and be their God;<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for<sup>[e]</sup> the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

No more death. No more sadness or pain. No crying. And God says, “see, I am making all things new.” And we, are made new.

So, while we may grieve the loss of loved ones, let us take some comfort in the hope of the gospel, and the Great Cloud of Witnesses who have traveled this unknown road before us. In this spirit of hope, I close with what Guthrie writes: “Where scripture places its emphasis is where we ought to place ours too – on living in the present in light of our future hope, knowing that what is going to happen to us, our loved ones and the world will be better than the very best we can imagine in our own wildest dreams.” <sup>4</sup> Today I have faith that it is so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 382.