

Yes, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” I want to point to the word “great” ... meaning that God is greater than we can imagine, beyond this world, a mercy and grace that is so amazing that it can indeed give new life, even carry us through the valley of the shadow of death, into resurrection life!

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the “spiritual world,” and what happens in a time of dying, or “passing on” to this next world. Of course there are the promises of Jesus (that ministers say at funerals) that where he was going, we shall also be. He says that his own life will go on (resurrection), and that so too will ours, as we believe (trust) in him. We can also read from mystics their description of the spiritual world, of angels, archangels and heavenly beings. One such mystic is Rudolph Steiner, early 1900’s Germany, who gave a well known lecture called *The Dead Are With Us*. He proclaims that they are still alive, AND interacting with us.

There are many stories and books written about “*near death experiences*,” which also point to a spiritual world. Well known psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote several books “*On Death and Dying*.” In her writings, she talks about experiences people have had near death. Apparently a common experience is to be greeted by loved ones who act as “escorts,” welcoming you into the spiritual realm.

I’ve been talking with a chaplain, (Rev. Jane Tuohy, associate minister at our U.U. church). We travel together these days to the Burlington Detention Center, and have plenty of time to swap stories about ministry. Jane, when starting a hospice chaplaincy, tells of one day, when she heard almost the same thing from two different patients. One woman was not religious, and nearing death, she remarked that her deceased husband had just come to visit her, saying “there was no hurry, but she could go any time.” Another

woman, with a lifetime of faith, said that her deceased husband just came to visit her, also saying “we can go any time now, but there is no hurry. You can wait for your niece to come visit. Sounds much like the idea of “escorts.” It also sounds like Emily Dickinson’s words about death: “Because I could not stop for death, He kindly stopped for me...We slowly drove, He knew no haste.”

About a month ago, I attended a talk by Sebastian Junger, You may remember Sebastian Junger for his book, and later movie, called “The Perfect Storm,” about the fishing boat, which sunk in the huge storm of October 1991, with no survivors. Junger was know as a journalist who reported on dangerous things and places in life. Yet one of his most recent books (c. 2024) is called “In My Time of Dying”.... Subtitle: “How I came face to face with the idea of an afterlife.” (Note that Mr. Junger has been an atheist most of his life.. and he implied a shifting his thinking!)

I will relate to you some of his experience in 2020. It started with abdominal pain, increasing steadily, and it turns out that he had ruptured an artery; an aneurysm had burst, and he was bleeding profusely inside. But the part that grabs my attention is what happened spiritually when the doctors estimated that he was only about 15 minutes from cardiac arrest and death. He says: *I felt myself getting pulled more and more into the darkness. And just when it seemed unavoidable, I became aware of something: My father. He had been dead eight years, but there he was, not so much floating as simply existing above me. My father exuded reassurance and seemed to be inviting me to go with him. He seemed to be saying: “Nothing to be scared of, Don’t fight it. I’ll take care of you.”* That sure sounds like an “escort” usually a loved one, that is said to greet and welcome us as we pass over to the other side.

Junger relates another very interesting part of his experience, that a few hours later, he spoke with a nurse who had been there at his “almost dying” and she asked how he was doing. *“I’m okay, I lied. But I can’t believe I almost died last night. It’s terrifying. She considered me for a moment, then said: Instead of thinking of it as something scary, try thinking of it as something sacred.”* Wow! Isn’t that a beautiful word of comfort and faith!

All these experiences, even when faith is not involved, point to some sort of connection that we all have between the physical and the spiritual world. Some speak of a “veil” between the two worlds, that is sometimes lifted, that sometimes has “thin places,” when and where we might have some communication with those who have passed on to the next world.

Let me return to our gospel lesson this morning and the beautiful image of Jesus bringing a young girl back to life. Jesus’ spirit fully connected with the spirit of the girl, nourishing life, even back into the blood and bones. One of the teachings of the church over the ages has been that Jesus was fully God and fully human. In other words his own inner connection between his body nature and his spirit nature was so fluid that they were two natures in one person. Sebastian Junger, in his research, dovetails religion and science, and reminds us that quantum physics speaks of waves that are particles, and that Einstein famously said “matter is spirit reduced to the point of visibility... there really is no matter.” Other physicists spoke of “mass and energy determining each other’s values, therefore mass and energy are really the same thing.”

Back to Jesus: two natures in one person. His body and his spirit were the same thing. Jesus, carpenter in Nazareth, and the Christ Spirit are both the same... hence we call him Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Christ.

Why share all this? From Rudolph Steiner, Kubler-Ross, Rev. Jane Tuohy, Sebastian Junger, and Jesus connecting with the spirit of the supposedly dead girl, we can learn... that the spiritual world is closer than we think, and we can open our minds and hearts to it. Indeed another great teaching from Jesus is that the “Kingdom of God is within us.” Jesus said to his disciples “I will be *with you* til the end of the ages.” So it logically follows that not only will Jesus as Risen Christ be with us, but our loved ones who have passed on ...may also be closer to us than we think!

I would be remiss if I didn't add a word of caution here. Sure, if we open our minds and hearts to presences or messages from the spirit world, it is logical that there could be evil forces that try to approach us or influence us. And as with our earthly thought, it all depends on our focus and intent. We know the saying is true that we have both evil and good impulses, inside us, like wolves, and which way we go in life depends on which one we feed. So it would be with spiritual influences... If our intent is love and goodness, all the things of God and Christ... then deep prayer and meditation will bring connection with our Christ, and at times with loved ones that are now part of what is often called the “communion of saints.”

The Holy Spirit of Pentecost said we will have visions and dreams! ... So let's always pause in prayer, let's shut off the constant distraction of cell phones, unplug regularly, for times of quiet prayer/meditation, even just sitting or walking along a river's edge. We can strengthen our spiritual nature continually; Jesus now as Christ Spirit can raise us up, beyond the gravity and weight of our earthly bodies! It is logical that if we can connect with him in Spirit, we can connect, in spirit, with those who have died. I say let's stay open, and listen for intuitions from Jesus, and from loved ones who have passed on. Amen.