

“Womb of the World”

John 14:1-3 and 18-19



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An antique looking plaque hangs on a wall in our summer cottage in Maine. No one knows where it came from – it’s always been there. With flowered border and bold print it announces:

*God did it
The Bible says it
I believe it
That settles it*

Whatever else you think about that message, you’ve got to admit it doesn’t wishy-washy around!

I want to be just as straight with you this Easter morning. Jesus said, *“Because I live, you also will live...I go to prepare a place for you.”* So far as I’m concerned, if Jesus promised this then I believe it and that settles it!

This is really all the sermon I’ve got for you today...

...Well, it appears I’ve got a few more minutes allotted to me. Perhaps you’d let me drive this promise around a little. There is some artistic precedent for doing so.

Beethoven’s mighty *Fifth Symphony* begins with a four-note punching theme. For the next thirty-five minutes the maestro explores every nook and cranny of this theme. When the symphony is over you have no more information than you began with, but your appreciation of the theme is infinitely richer.

Look, it's Easter! And no matter how sophisticated we believe our-selves to be, we'd all like to find some chink in the armor of our limited understandings, a gap just big enough to let in some hopeful rays of immortality.

Easter! Maybe there is something *true* about it after all. I don't mean symbolically, or liturgically, or ceremonially true. I mean *literally* out-of-this-world true!

True that the grave is not the end. True that death was never meant to be the final word. True that Job's ancient question, "*If a man die, shall he live again?*" (Job 14:14 *KJV*), was finally answered from an open and empty tomb, "*Because I live, you also will live!*"

Birth As A Clue

Yet, as everyone knows, there is a problem with exploring the life to come. Questions about immortality and its dark side, death, do not yield to a frontal attack. We have no empirical evidence.

Oh sure paperbacks and TV documentaries trumpet that science has now proven there is 'life after life.' But stop and listen to people's reactions. The skeptic still says, "I don't know whether I really *believe* all that."

On this side of the grave what you *believe* trumps all questions about what's on the other side. Yet there may at least be a way of talking about 'the other side' through an experience each of us has had...*birth!*

We all began our lives in the watery warm world of a woman's womb. In the beginning we looked like a bit of transparent jelly, smaller than a grain of sand. Yet hidden away there were all the mysteries of body, mind and spirit – all the vast potentialities of life.

Cells began to multiply. Gradually – miraculously! – we were formed into a fetus. There in our mother's womb we were secure, perfectly adapted to our perfect environment.

Had we been aware of it at the time the prospect of birth would have been terrifying. What could it mean to leave the womb for some other world? What could ‘some other world’ possibly be like?

In the womb we lived without breathing; how could we possibly live by breathing? In the womb we lived in water; how could we possibly survive in the air? In the womb we lived in the dark; how could we possibly endure the brightness? Being born would surely have felt like dying.

Back then, of course, we could not have known that the womb’s only purpose was to prepare us for this ‘other world’ beyond the womb. But in fact *we were being prepared!*

In the darkness, eyes were formed for light we had never seen. In the aquatic stillness, ears were fashioned for sounds we had never heard. In our fluid world, lungs were developed for air we had never breathed. In the intellectual hiatus, brain cells were readied for thoughts we had never had. The womb was getting us ready for a bigger world the other side of birth.

Call it the wild imaginings of my fanciful mind, but I can’t help wondering – *what if the world were a womb?*

There’s Something More

Yes, this very world we live in! What if, for those of us who believe such things, we are being prepared even now for a world as different from this one as this world has proven different from our mother’s body. It sort of gets you thinking, doesn’t it?

Well, here’s something to keep you thinking. The very structure of our world keeps whispering ‘there’s something more.’ You sense it first, I think, when you learn to count. Very quickly you discover there is no stopping place. There’s always another number beyond the last one named.

It’s the same with every human discipline – physics, history, music – everything finally fingers the fringes of the infinite. It’s like the close-to-the-edge-of-madness feeling you get staring up at the night sky trying to stick it into your brain that there is absolutely no end out there... none at all!

Science for its part keeps documenting our intuitions of something more. Take the human ear. These strange appendages astride our faces can pick up sounds between sixteen cycles and eighteen thousand cycles a second – a range of about eleven octaves. That’s a lot of sound!

But there is more sound than that, as bats and dogs and radios keep reminding us. In fact, with our natural ears we hear only a teasingly small fraction of all the sound around us this very moment.

Or how about the human eye? Just think of it, through your eyes you can see all the colors of the rainbow, but no more. Oh, there is more color than that!

There is infrared at one end of the scale and ultra-violet at the other. Beyond this there are x-rays and gamma rays and cosmic rays, and God-only-knows what all else. With our unaided eyes we are probably missing most of the sights around us right now.

There is so much more than our limited senses can pick up. So never cower before the appearance of things. Never allow the merely visible to monopolize you or the purely tangible to tyrannize you.

*“No eye has seen, or ear has heard
[not in this worldly womb at any rate!],
what God has prepared for those who love Him.”
(I Corinthians 2:9 NIV)*

Won't Stay Dead

But here’s a twist we hardly suspected. We can’t go exploring for long in the land of the physical without ending up wading in the shallows of the spiritual.

Take memory for instance, our amazing capacity to record, retain and reflect on impressions received by our bodies – even though our bodies keep changing. That’s what I’ve heard, haven’t you?

They say, about every seven years or so, we get a new body. The tired blood, the worn-out cells sluff off. But memory stays. I don’t have

the same body today I had when I began my ministry. Alas, that body is long gone! But many memories recorded by my old bodies are still with me.

In fact I've got memories that go back well over ten bodies now!

There is a 'you' and a 'me' even in this world that outlasts the mere body! "*The things that are seen,*" Paul says, things like our bodies, "*are transient, but the things that are unseen,*" like God and our life-in-God, "*are eternal*" (II Cor. 4:18 RSV).

That's why it's almost humorous to picture those women hurrying to the tomb that first Easter morning and fretting about the big heavy stone. They had to learn and so must we that God doesn't pay any attention to our stones, who rolls them, or seals them, or guards them.

God's love, God's life, God's Son will not stay dead because *we* kill Him, will not rot in a grave because *we* put Him there!

Death was beaten the day it took on Jesus Christ and grim death hasn't been the same since. It no longer has the stuff in it to frighten the likes of you and me. Not, at least, if we are with God.

It is the revealed character of God that undergirds our Easter faith. If God let men do their worst to Jesus, then retreated, did nothing and let that matchless personality disintegrate into the dust of extinction, he would be no God deserving of our worship.

It's Morning!

Surely God loves his Son as much as you love yours. You would never accept your son's extinction, not if you had power to do anything about it. God would not allow his Son's extinction, and he had power to do something about it. And God did something about it!

We trust in the redeeming love and power of God demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. His resurrection anchors our confidence in the life to come.

In the end, Christians do not have a neat theory that proves we live after we die. *All we have is a Lord who did it!* He rose from the dead and turning to those of us who put our faith in him Christ announces, *“Because I live, you also will live...I am preparing a place for you.”*

What a promise! It reminds me of an earlier time when we left our mothers’ womb and came into this world. Maybe being born was terrifying, but if so what were our first sensations – strong hands beneath us, loving eyes looking down at us. There was warmth and nourishment and love.

Someone knew we were coming. They anticipated our arrival. They prepared a place for us! If God has been so careful about our arrival in this world, will he be careless about our entry into the next?

When she from whose womb I came died, she did so with her characteristic faith and gallantry telling our family, “Whether I live or whether I die, I’m in the Lord’s hands.” When she went to that place the Lord had prepared for her, my father sent his missionary brother a cable. It read, “Helen fell asleep this evening. We will see her in the morning.”

I wonder if this will be the way of it? During our last hours in this worldly womb our Lord will put us to rest. We will feel his arms beneath us and sense His presence with us. In that knowledge we will fall asleep.

When next we are aware, we will still be in God’s presence as the dawn-glory of eternity breaks over us. We may even hear God’s welcome, “My child, it’s morning.”

This is the message of Easter, the promise Christ gives to all who trust Him – *“Because I live, you also will live.”* As far as I am concerned if Jesus promised this then I believe it and that settles it!



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