

What happens to the dead?

What happens when those we love but see no more  
take their last breath - when the cells dissolve,  
the molecules break down, the amino acids erode?

For that matter, what happens to those we didn't love,  
those we were separated from by envy or anger?  
And those we never knew, the billions who have gone before us,  
whose lives had every bit as much meaning and value  
as our own, but were, to us, strangers?

It's the great question, isn't it? The great, unanswerable question.

Biology, physics, philosophy - none of the great disciplines of learning  
can answer this question with authority.

For that matter, neither can religion.  
Neither can OUR religion - Christianity.

There is no proof of what, if anything, waits for us beyond the grave.  
The claims of Christianity are not to be taken as provable facts,  
but as proclamations of faith.

Having had an experience of God's presence,  
there are claims - beliefs - we choose to accept, or reject.

Claims that, if we choose to accept them,  
shape the rest of our lives.

We choose to build our lives on the belief  
that every single human being is created by, loved,  
and made in the image of God,  
and therefore that every human being we encounter  
is to be treated with great respect.

We choose to believe that the creative, reconciling Spirit of God  
remains at work in the world even though we too often reject it.

And we choose to build our lives  
on the hope that we can be delivered from the grave  
through the power of the One who took on our human flesh  
and made it sacred,  
who sacrificed his own life for us, who rose from the dead,  
the first fruit of eternal life for those who choose to live.

But there is no proof. There is no proof.



What we do have is a witness.  
The witness of Christ crucified and risen.  
The witness of his Church, who encountered the risen One  
in a locked room, on a road to Emmaus,  
and who encounter him still in the breaking of the bread  
and in the prayers.

And there is the witness of those whose lives are guided  
by the power of the Holy Spirit even now. Even now.



So, what happens to the dead?

Tonight we gather to remember the dead who lived under  
the name of Jesus. Christians, they are called - Little Christs.

For those who were a part of the body of the crucified & risen One,  
the Church has had various teachings when it comes to life after death.

Teachings that evolved as our understanding of the universe evolved,  
but here are three BROAD claims that I think  
are consistently part of the Christian hope -  
across the centuries & the different expressions of Christianity.



First, the dead are STILL part of the body.

They are still with us, and we with them.

The Body of Christ - the Church - exists across time & space.

When we sing praise to God,

when we sing “Kyrie eleison” or “Sanctus Sanctus Sanctus,”

we sing with the whole Church -

from Mary Magdalene on Easter Day

to some unknown farmer in India 12 centuries ago

to a fundamentalist, hellfire & brimstone shoutin’ preacher

in 1930s Tennessee

to one of the handful of Christians remaining in Gaza

who was killed this week.

The living and the dead, praising God together,

praying for help and mercy - together.

Those who died with Christ are still united to us through Christ.

Speak to them, even now. Ask them to pray for you.



Second, they are being perfected.

What this means and how this works has been described  
in many different ways over the years,  
but at its heart it means that those who died in Christ  
come to be more and more like him.

1st John puts it this way,

“What we will be has not yet been revealed.  
What we do know is this: when he is revealed,  
we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

Those we remember this night were works in progress.

They had wounds they suffered and wounds they inflicted.  
But now they see Christ face to face.  
And seeing him as he is, they are being healed. Redeemed.

However God does it, we build our lives on the hope  
that they are becoming more and more in the image of Christ.



And last, they rest in the Lord.

They are at peace. They are at peace. They are at peace.

Tonight many of us allow ourselves to remember  
the pain and grief that goes with loving someone who has died.

But a few of us are here because pain & grief  
are our constant companions - with us every day,  
always there, always threatening to overwhelm us.

If that describes you this evening, I wish I could fix it for you.

I wish I could tell you that this prayer or this practice will make it go away.

I can say I'm proud of you for being here.

You carry this burden each day and yet you still found the strength  
to come here on this special night.

I can't make the pain go away but I can tell you this:

the one you grieve is at rest in the Lord. The one you love is at peace.

And I think that one day - I wish I knew when -

one day you may be surprised to discover that the peace of God  
has come back to you.

That after too long a season of suffering, of grieving, of depression,  
God's peace is there for you to take, if you will.

When that day comes, I hope you will accept, will SEIZE,  
the peace of God, and the release from the pain  
that you've carried for those you love.

For the one you love is still with you.

The one you love is being made whole.

The one you love is at peace.

Amen.