

NOW AND FOREVER  
Easter 2 April 18, 2004  
John 3: 16 and Romans 6: 3-11

In the book, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris describes his day in a French class shortly after moving to Paris. Students came to a section in their textbook about holidays. In their bumbling French, students were attempting to respond to a non-Christian from Morocco who asked, “Excuse me, but what’s an Easter?” “It is”, said one of the second language learners, “a party of the little boy of God who call his self Jesus. He die one day and then he go above my head to live with your father. He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the people. He nice, the Jesus.” We are even more limited in language when it comes to resurrection, salvation, eternal things, than those students attempting to explain in awkward vocabulary and grammar what Easter is.

A mentor advised me to not try to describe what Easter means on Easter—just proclaim it—he said. “But the weeks after Easter, always preach about eternal life.”

Easter is too important to sing Alleluias on Easter, bow to the empty cross and leave it in the pantry to find it —like old Easter candy— next year.

*God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting, that is, eternal life!* How does it work? I remember trying to figure it out: Jesus teaches love, he gets killed by those who hate him, is resurrected three days later—that is, the disciples experience him alive... and now I have a life beyond the grave as well. That it’s all about God requiring his beloved Jesus to bear my sins die, and die for me, a gruesome death in order for me to avoid eternal damnation hasn’t seemed consistent with what a God of love would require. Maybe that explanation is helpful to you—maybe not.

We are in the realm of mystery. Requiring an explanation may be more dangerous than useful. Trying to work it out like an algebraic proof becomes theological gymnastics in which theologians like the Apostle Paul letter. Eternal life. Life beyond death is a truth almost universally longed for and for many absolutely believed in whether or not it's explainable. For some, it's the only thing Christianity is about. For others, it's an afterthought. For still more, a great gift which is the beginning, not the end of their Christian faith.

So what is eternal life; what does it mean for you?

First: **Eternal life has its roots in our Creator's love for humanity.**

What are you willing to do for love?

Imagine being in love with someone with whom you cannot communicate. What extreme measures would you take to be able to express yourself, and to understand your beloved? After we were married and David was 8000 miles away on an island in the Pacific and I hadn't seen him for 3 months, and my computer was down, and I was longing for him, it didn't matter that phone calls were \$4.50 per minute. I dialed that number and paid the price when the phone bill came. *We do crazy things for love.* I have watched family members of a loved one who is paralyzed and unable to speak, spell her needs out using an alphabet board, indicating each word with a blink of her eyes. *We do extraordinary things for love.* A story in *Christian Century* tells of a woman who fell madly in love with a man while traveling in South America. One spoke only English, the other only Spanish. While they are each learning the other's language they employed a software system called Babel Fish to translate their love letters. (online translation services are much improved) Unfortunately the software then was only 70% accurate resulting in a confession of love such as "I miss your presence, I miss your glances" becoming "I tell you that strange your presence, also strange your looks." *We risk looking foolish for love.*

“For God so loved the world...”, the Gospel writer John tells us. God desires to be in communication with us. God wants to be known, and wants us to know God. It was when nothing else was working: not the first attempt with Adam and Eve; not the formation of covenant people through Abraham and Sarah; not the Law given to Moses; not even the ranting and raving poetic prophets preaching repentance got through our thick skulls and stubborn hearts. Yet...out of a long-suffering steadfast love, God released Jesus the Son, gave him flesh and blood so as to speak the language of humanity and thus to make that communication possible. God, in Jesus, showed the world in something so risky, so foolish, so crazy as a cross, what living and loving and dying for love is. The threat of death didn’t stop Jesus from showing love, justice, grace. That’s crazy. God, in response, showed the world that such love is more powerful than death. Jesus was the 100% accurate translation of God’s love.

Second: **Baptism, not death, marks (not causes.. marks) our entering into eternal life.**

At infant baptism we mark the promise of salvation, the promise of eternal life with God...before we have barely begun to live. In the epistle reading this morning you heard these powerful words: *We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we might too live in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)*

Richard Rohr, Franciscan monk and theologian, writes that the cross is not a divinely required transaction, but the mystery of how evil is transformed into good. Loss (death) and renewal (resurrection) is not only the perennial, transformative pattern we see the cycle of the seasons, in autumn decay and spring sprouting, it is the pattern for us as well. It’s the pattern for all of Creation. Christ’s death and resurrection is God’s exclamation point on this truth, as if God is saying to us—“you too”. From the small losses now from which growth and goodness can emerge, to the largest loss—your own bodily death, (drowning in baptism if you will), everything will be restored. Our belief doesn’t make this happen. Our belief gives us entrance into what already IS. Eternal life—a life

that accepts, celebrates, and depends on this pattern is a way of life God offers us now, not just a something that is an ultimate goal.

Someone once said that our lives are as brief as the hyphen between the dates on the gravestone. We are living the hyphen, and it is part of the whole. Eternal life is too precious a gift to wait until death to begin to live in it. It is NOT true that the only life that matters is life after death. That is a fallacy religion has used to foster oppression, and to find an excuse for inaction, to tolerate poverty and suffering. The gift of God's love and life for you and me should be affecting the choices we make, the words we speak, the actions we perform. God made us for life on earth first, and insists that this life has value and worth, now. The whole of it—from infancy, childhood, on.

### **Third. For emphasis, eternal life is life in the presence of God--NOW**

Theologian Abraham Heschel writes that eternity is not so much perpetual future but perpetual presence. God-with-us doesn't wait until we die. A child at the time of her grandfather's death asked her mother, "Where did grandpa go" and when her response came, "He has gone to be with God" the little girl responded, "I never want to be with God; I want to stay here with you." God is already with us; we don't need to die to be with God. At death, the temporal physical life drops away. What is left is our connection, our communication with God which started long, long before.

I know of two occasions, two "thin places" the Celtic spirituality calls it, when we see the continuity which is eternity: in the delivery room, and around the bed of the dying. These are times of waiting, times filled with awe, and fear, and anxiety. These are holy times. These are times rich with Holy Spirit.

+One moment, a fetus emerges from its 9-month incubation without breath, then with an inhalation and a wail, earthly life begins.

+One moment, an aged loved one, breathing sporadically, fails to inhale once more and then earthly life ceases. I believe God holds the tiny hand of the unborn through the birthing and never lets go...and continues to hold the wrinkled hand of the dying and never lets go. God's presence sees us through the awe and anticipation of birth and through the reluctant adventure of dying. This is eternal life: perpetual presence. A love that will not let us go!

St. Augustine pondered death often, was afraid of it, and we have his writings to see how he worked out that angst. Listen to his words:

*Let us sing alleluia here on earth, while we still live in anxiety,  
so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security.  
We shall have no enemies in heaven; we shall never lose a friend.  
God's praises are sung both there and here,*

*but here they are sung in anxiety,*

*there in security;*

*here they are sung by those destined to die,*

*there by those destined to live forever,*

*here they are sung in hope,*

*there in hope's fulfillment;*

*here they are sung by wayfarers,*

*there, by those living in their own country.*

*So then, let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do...sing, but continue your journey...sing then, but keep going.*

**Sing then.** Alleluia. And Amen.

