

Heaven Ahead

Easter, 2023

April 9, 2023

Heaven.

Heavenly.

A taste of Heaven.

A slice of Heaven.

Heaven bound.

Heaven-sent.

All those terms are based on the concept, the hope, the faith
that Heaven is real.

That heaven is really, really, really good.

And that the best of anything on earth must be a mirror-image of what's in heaven.

My favorite dessert is Opera Cake, which I first had at the Maria Callas Café in Budapest. I needed a break from a long day of writing, found this café at 2pm in the afternoon, the waiter convinced me to try Opera Cake. I did. Immediately I got on the phone, cancelled my dinner reservation for that night and instead ate 4 pieces of opera Cake. Heaven.

Our assumptions about Heaven are based on a few verses and chapters from the Bible,
backed up by religious art,
culture,
church doctrine and teaching,
imagery,

imagination.

Dante's "Paradiso."

The Vatican's Sistine Chapel.

Hieronymus Bosch's paintings,

Handel's "Messiah" and the "Hallelujah Chorus"

John Lennon's "Imagine...there's no heaven."

Angel Food Cake,

and Harp playing.

The bulk of what we imagine of Heaven comes from the Book of Revelation, wonderfully over-the-top descriptions that leave us as spell-bound as a 5-year-old on Christmas morning or their first trip to Disneyland.

Streets paved with gold.

Gates made from a single pearl.

Heaven's layers of foundations made of precious jewels.

The River of Life flowing through it.

St. Peter, waiting at the Gate.

The Saints milling about.

Angels flying about.

God's glory so brilliant there's no longer the need for sun or moon.

No more tears.

No more sickness.

Perfection.

All to entice us to be worthy of admittance, whether by true faith, good works, or a combination of both.

You just don't want to miss it.

What do we want heaven to be, that is at least backed up by the Bible?

Well, first and foremost we want Easter to be true...and true for all of us. Easter celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and that's good news for Jesus, but the Bible goes much farther than that, describing Jesus as "the First Fruits" saying "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

(1 Corinthians 15:20).

A more modern translation puts it. "But in fact, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died."

Around here this winter, you and I saw our first flower about March 1, first a crocus, then a daffodil.

That's nice.

But if Spring growth stops there, with just 1 crocus –

no dahlias coming,

no roses blooming,

no Dogwood blossom,

no summer harvest,

We will all be sadly disappointed.

We want the 1st crocuses to be the sure sign that winter doldrums,

Winter bleakness,

Winter cold,

Winter death are over.

We want to know more life is coming.

So Easter exists to assure us, that “this is what God can do with Death.” Taking our greatest sorrows, our worst losses, and transforming them into exquisite joy.

The second thing we want from heaven is recognition. We want to be there still being the essence of ourselves. We want to know others, and to be known. We want a genuine reunion.

There are people who died peacefully, and we plan ourselves to die peacefully, entirely based on the belief that we are going to somewhere and to someone; to people we can't wait to see. A reunion so wanted that we can handle the leaving of this life.

I had a friend die recently whose final days were eased by the knowledge that he would soon see his beloved son. It mattered that much.

A lot of pop-culture images of heaven have us sitting on a cloud wearing angel wings, playing the harp, floating over the heavenly city, looking down with awe and exclaiming, “Holy Cow, those streets really are paved with gold!!”

Ok, I can imagine a half hour of that, tops. But if there is a there, there, and I manage to get there, I'm not there for the glitz or the swag. I'm there to catch up and be caught up with. There are people I want to see, just as there are people who one day will want to see me.

Jesus puts heaven in very personal terms. "Let not your heart be troubled. I am going to my father's house to prepare a place for you!! Then I will come back and take you with me." (John 14: 1-3).

And when Jesus tells us the "Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man," or any of his stories about Heaven, people are always being people, they are interacting, talking, reminiscing, knowing and being known.

Our beloved Aunt Greta died recently, and we held her funeral at the Congregational Church up in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The host pastor welcomed us with a most extraordinary vision of heaven. He pictured a life for Aunt Greta full of new opportunities, new friends, new lessons, new projects.

The pastor told us that "the afterlife is a place of meaning and value," that the "heavenly life is a place of ongoing spiritual progress" that "all our good memories and love from this life are part of the treasures we take with us into the next;" that "spiritual growth is certainly a key feature of this life but even more so in heaven."

And he reminded us, "the purpose of heaven is not endless leisure but endless growth, love and life."

And last, we want Heaven to be like my Opera Cake in Budapest, to be really, really, really good. That's the Biblical promise of "no more tears." Those are such three powerful, earth-shattering, literally earth-shattering words: "No more tears."

I emphasize "earth shattering" because Heaven is the antidote for Earth, because our life on Earth has so much sorrow, so much injustice, so much hurt, so much agony.

Think of the losses in your own life.

Think of the problems in our own society.

Think of the wrongs perpetrated daily in our world. How often we are moved to tears, to anger, to despair.

When I use that verse at a funeral, "no more tears" I tell people that is God's recognition that in this life there are things that just aren't fair, obstacles that are too tough to overcome, sudden turns in the road too quick, injustices that never get righted. And God's promise about heaven is that whatever caused us tears, or heartache or fear, all that is gone, all that is defeated, and our tears, once and for all, are wiped away.

Come to think of it, that's all John Lennon was saying in that famous song, "Imagine." That heaven should start here, not just there; now, not just later.

Imagine that!

What If?

An Easter Litany

David: What if it all happened?

People: What if
early on Sunday
the women came to the tomb
not believing
and then men slept late
probably depressed
and everything seemed sad, until...

Alida: What if
the too, too heavy stone
with the Roman seal on it
and soldiers guarding it
so nobody could tamper with it
was mysteriously rolled away
and the tomb was wide open?

David: What if

 nobody was in the tomb

 nobody and no body

 except an angel

 who said things that couldn't possible be true?

People: What if

 it was all true

 that angels are real

 and angels are sent from God at just the right time

 and angels speak to us with just the right words?

Alida: What if the right words are

 don't be afraid

 He is risen

 She is risen

 Your loved ones are risen

 You will be risen

 Life wins

 Love wins

 Death is defeated?

David: What if the women
 scared, perplexed, overjoys
 all at once
 told the men, who were
 scared, perplexed, and not yet overjoyed...

Alida: Until
 one by one
 they see an empty tomb
 with NO body
 until Somebody shows up
 and they see wounds without sorrow
 they see faith beyond doubt
 they see a story that needs telling
 They see God at work!

ALL: What if
we lived the rest of our lives
with love stronger than sorrow
love stronger than hate
with love that so loved the world

that the world was given

the greatest Love of all?

And we believed it?

All of it.