

## THE DIMENSIONS OF HEAVEN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14

In Carl Hiassen's crime novel, *Basket Case*, the narrator at one point says, "From the pancake house I drove directly to the county morgue. The contrast in ambiance is not especially striking."<sup>1</sup>

There is a sense in which most American interior space has become the product of one palette. As Cullen Murphy in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* writes, "The atrium of a Hyatt, the reception area of a law firm, the meeting annex of a church, the viewing parlor at a funeral home ... have become nearly indistinguishable. The colors and carpeting, the plant life and artwork, all seem to derive from common templates."<sup>2</sup>

For those of us who like to think heaven will be a change, there is good news in John's fourteenth chapter. Jesus says that in his father's house there are many mansions, and that he is going to prepare a place for us. I hope that the mansions will have some variation and color, a variety of building materials and lots of style. Maybe heaven will be more like South Florida, or perhaps like the Castro District in San Francisco with Victorian gingerbread and wild colors of lavender and orange, blue and green. But I definitely hope it will not be like Tempe, Arizona with all those adobe colors blending in with the desert, not a red or a green or a vermilion anywhere in sight.

Likewise, I am hanging onto the hope that heaven is not full of cookie cutter McMansions like some endless version of Basking Ridge, New Jersey. To me that would be a colossal letdown.

On the other hand, as is the case with all these passages in the Sundays after Easter when the church recalls the response of the first disciples to their experience of the resurrection life and its dimensions, there is a bit of vagueness about what it is that we should expect, architecturally speaking, in heaven. Or can we even speak of architecture or interior design as heavenly concerns?

My friend George Yu, an architect in Philadelphia, when he discusses architecture with church people, usually brings a power point presentation which begins with a photograph of the altar tapestry from the cathedral in Ghent. It shows the peaceable kingdom with lions and lambs lying down together, people happy, the unicorns dancing, and George says, "Please note that there is no church in heaven, only an altar outdoors. This is bad news for architects," he says with a glint in his eye. "I am not certain what this means for architects in heaven. No need for them," he says. Who of us, after all, knows precisely what our post-resurrection expectations of heaven should be and what its dimensions are?

John, in his own gospel offers a confusing array of resurrection appearances that send us mixed messages on just how concrete we should be about the resurrection life. He tells us, for instance, that Mary went to the tomb on Easter morning, saw the risen Lord and reached out to touch him, but Jesus forbade her because he had not yet ascended to his Father in heaven.

Later in the same gospel, in a somewhat spooky appearance, Jesus comes to the disciples in an upper room, even though the doors are locked, suggesting that the resurrected body of Jesus has some kind of mystical and porous cellular structure, sort of like “Beam me up, Scotty.”

One week after Easter, Thomas, who was not present when Jesus appeared to the disciples the first time, is visited by the risen Lord and invited to touch the nail prints in Jesus’ hands and the wound in his side, though John carefully omits the details as to whether Thomas actually did so.

And as if that were not confusing enough, John then tells a story about the disciples gathered by the Sea of Tiberius where Jesus comes to them by the beach, shows them a few tricks of the fishing trade, and afterward they have a fish fry where John makes a point of saying that Jesus cooked the meal and gave the disciples bread and fish to eat. In *Luke’s* version of the resurrection fish fry, Jesus actually takes a piece of fish and eats it in front of the disciples.

So, which is it, corporeal substance, or non-corporeal insubstantiality? Could you touch Jesus or not? In fact, let’s cut to the chase, will the heavenly mansions have hot and cold running water, and what will be the thread count on the bed linens?

Will we be able to touch and see one another in the resurrection life, or will there be any desire or need of that? Once Jesus was asked a trick question about seven brothers who all married the same woman, and “Who, in heaven would be her husband?” asked his inquisitors. To which Jesus answered, “...in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” whatever that means.

There are so many mixed signals here. Just what are the dimensions and parameters of this heaven where Jesus has gone and we hope to be?

I can tell you that for me, one of the hardest questions I am ever asked are the ones that come from time to time when I am caring for someone who is terminally ill. Here is someone who has been ravaged by cancer, down to eighty five pounds, or is in the ICU, gasping for every breath, fighting a raging fever, and he leans toward you and he says, “Tell me what heaven will be like.”

This is the point where in seminary counseling classes they tell you to throw the question back to the person who is asking it, sort of like Carl Rogers’ technique, and you say “Well what do you think it will be like?”

Which I think is a really smarmy way to getting out of the line of fire. I mean here you are God’s representative, poor example that you are, and someone is finally asking you a deeply spiritual question, something that is coming from their innermost vulnerability and neediness at a time when it really counts and they are hanging on your every word. If you don’t have something to say at that point, some clear declarative sentence, some statement of hope on which you yourself hang your life, what have you got as a pastor? “Jon, what do you think heaven will be like?”

Doctors come into the sick room with stethoscopes and tongue depressors, nurses come bearing antibiotics and IV bags, even the janitor at the hospital has a mop and a Lysol solution to sanitize the environment and kill germs on surfaces. But you as a

minister come in empty handed, with nothing but your faith, and of course God peeking over your shoulder.

“What do you think heaven will be like?” he asks, and there you are on the spot, where throwing the question back is not a sufficient answer.

And maybe the beginning point is realizing that there is no sufficient answer. Jesus only tells us that he is on his way to God’s house, on his way to preparing a place for us, which is to say that he is on his way to God, and it sounds like the floor plans and the rooflines and the vistas out the kitchen window are still in the blueprint stage. So if it’s a little vague, this description of heaven that you give, maybe it’s in keeping with the open nature of what little that Jesus had to say about it.

Certain things are clear, however. God is there, I think we can say that with certainty. And where God is there is safety and warmth, beauty and healing, peace and comfort.

There’s no need for morphine in heaven, or Demerol, or Dilaudid because pain is over, there’ll be no more of that in heaven. No IV bags, no alcohol swabs, no ER room, in fact, no hospitals. No Kleenex there because weeping is over once you pass into the heavenly realm. No more tears, because regret and loneliness and grief and sadness will have flown away. Whatever had stalked and frightened and cast a cloud over life will be gone, because in heaven there is no fear.

That’s what heaven is like, in my estimation, the absence of the things that most frighten and bedevil us, even death itself. Death will be no more. And maybe that’s an affirmation that is based on a *via negativa*, saying what heaven is by saying what it isn’t, but sometimes when you are *in extremis*, to know that the next state is not the same as the last is hopeful news indeed.

There is a sense in which John’s fourteenth chapter, and Jesus’ words of departure to his disciples are just not enough. We are left wanting more. More detail, more color commentary, more specificity, more clarity all around.

And what little specificity there is, is frankly a bit annoying, as when Jesus says, “No one comes to the father but by me.” It’s hard to know if Jesus was making a claim of supercession, whether we are seeing the anxious editorial hand of John who has overstated Jesus’ case in transcribing it, whether we may be hearing this claim out of context in a multi-cultural world today which was not that of Jesus’ world and which therefore might be expressed differently today. It’s hard to tell.

I just know that almost every pastor I know who reads those words of Jesus, “No one comes to the father but by me,” cringes a bit at the way it sounds today in this context as opposed to how it was most likely originally spoken and heard by Jesus and his followers.

All that having been said, Jesus may leave us wanting more specificity about the dimensions of heaven, the secret details on how to find the gate to it for instance, as if it were like the railroad station in the Harry Potter books where you must find track 9¾ at Kings Cross station, invisible to Muggles but well known to wizards. It is still the case, however, that Jesus leaves us with no ambiguity about *who* is there even if what it is like is left open ended.

“I will come again and take you to myself,” Jesus said, “so that where I am, there you may be also.” And if he is there, I take comfort in the thought that if someone who has given everything for me, even his own life is there, I will be all right. I will be among friends. I will be loved and safe and in a good place.

Maybe the real question of heaven is less “where do we go?” than “who will show us the way?”

John Claypool writes<sup>3</sup> “Our hope is not in what we know about the life everlasting. Our hope is in whom we know. Who is the God who is waiting for us at the end of our lives? ... There was a child born [in 1800] named John Todd in Vermont. [He would become a founder of Holyoke College.] When he was six years old his mother became insane and his father died.] ...He was sent to live with an aunt who had never married and had no children and whom he had never seen before. The aunt turned out to be a very tender and loving person. He grew up well in her home. She put him through college and saw him into young manhood.

“Some years after he was grown, John got word that his aunt was seriously ill and was, in fact, at the end of her life, and that as warm and tender and loving as she had been to John, she seemed to have been struck by a remarkable terror at the prospect of dying. So John Todd, the grown man, wrote her this letter.

“It is now 35 years since I, a little boy of six, was left alone in the world. I will never forget the day I made the long journey to your house. I was disappointed that you sent your hired man, Caesar, to come and fetch me. I remember my tears and anxiety as I perched on your horse and clung to Caesar’s back as we started for my new home. I became more frightened as we rode along. ‘Do you think she will have gone to bed when we get there?’ I asked Caesar. ‘On no,’ he said, ‘When we get out of these here woods, you’re going to be able to see her candle shining in the window.’ Sure enough, we rode out of the clearing, and there was your candle, and there you were waiting at the door, and there were your arms lifting me off my horse, and there was the fire you had built for me in the fireplace, and there was a good warm supper, and there you were taking me to bed and hearing my prayers, and not leaving me alone until I had fallen off to sleep.

“I’m reminding you of these things now, dear Aunt, because soon God will send for you and take you to your new home. I want you not to fear that summons. I want you not to fear the strange journey or even the dark messenger of death because I am sure that at the end of the road you will find love and welcome. You will find that you will be as safe there as here, safer indeed, in God’s love and care. Because surely, dear Aunt, God can be trusted to be as kind to you as you were to me. Love, John.”

I don’t know what kind of mansions there are in heaven. If the streets are lined with jasmine or the gates have pearls. But I am sure that somehow there is a candle lit in the window, and there is one there who has expected our coming all this long time. There will be a good warm fire in the fireplace, no doubt, and a lovely supper, and a good night’s sleep at which the angels, will keep watch all night long until the morning comes and the dawn breaks into a glorious new day.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Cullen Murphy's article in *Atlantic Monthly*, June 2002, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, p. 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> John Claypool, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Spring, 1990, p.23.