

In the 1970's, a fellow by the name of Raymond Moody interviewed hundreds of men and women who had gone through "clinical death" and been revived. Dr. Moody published a report on his findings which later became a best-selling book. You see, Dr. Moody found striking similarity among the accounts. In fact, there were **fifteen** recurring points of likeness. So, if we were to construct a composite experience based on the common elements of one-hundred individual death experiences, it might sound like this:

*"A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself **OUTSIDE OF HIS OWN PHYSICAL BODY**, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.*

*After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a body; but one with a different nature and different powers from the physical body he's left behind. Others come to meet and to help him – the 'spirits' of relatives and friends who have already died. A loving, warm spirit – **A BEING OF LIGHT** – appears before him. The being asks a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life. The being helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point, he approaches a barrier which, apparently, represents the [threshold] between earthly life and the next life. But, he finds that he must go back to the earthly life because the time for his death has not yet come.*

*He resists because, by now, he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love...and peace. Still, **he reunites with his physical body and lives.** Later...he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so for two reasons: First, there are no human words adequate to describe the unearthly episode. And, second, he finds that people don't believe him. So, he stops telling other people, even though the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life."*

The title of Raymond Moody's book and our meditation this morning is: Life After Life.

I'm going to break with convention and tell you the point of this sermon at the very beginning. Well, let me tell what the point is not! The point is not to prove that there is life after death. **Proof is not possible.** The most I can do is tell you that I believe in the *possibility* that bodily death is not the end. I can also present the gospel witness on the matter (and I will). But, even then, you may be left with reasonable doubt. And so I would encourage you to lay aside your doubts for just a little while. Proof is not always possible; but it is always possible to suspend disbelief long enough to apprehend a piece of God's truth.

So, as I mentioned, Moody found **fifteen points of likeness** among the cases he studied. In the interest of time, let's consider three: 1. OUT OF BODY; 2. THE BEING OF LIGHT; and 3. COMING BACK.

I've never been out of my physical body. I've been out of my mind lots of times! Most people tend to think about life in physical terms, I think. When I started here at the church and I was trying to get familiar with people, I used the pictorial directory. I have a photographic memory, so I studied pictures and quickly began to associate pictures with names. David has a round face, blue eyes and reddish hair...Sarah has white hair, wears glasses and she lives on Main Street...and so on. The first layer of my relationship with you was based on your physical appearances. And then as I began to visit with you...at home...by your hospital bedside...or here at church, I began to know something about your inner lives. And months later, we have something that goes below the surface – beyond the physical. This, to me, has been a great joy.

It sounds like something you'd read on a teabag label, but the true measure of a person is not what he looks like or what she does for a living or where she lives...but who he or she is on the inside. I am not and you are not a purely physical being. I am...and you are...your thoughts...your dreams...your fears, your faith and your feelings...your hurts and your history.

As we pour ourselves into relationship with each other, the lasting connection occurs at the level of the SPIRIT. In our relationship with the Creator, we offer our INNER SELVES first and last. So, it's interesting that the people in Moody's case study report a separation between the inner self and the physical self at or near the moment of physical death. It's an intriguing possibility that the BODY and the SPIRIT are separate and, yet, conjoined – one with a FINAL consequence and the other, perhaps, without.

The most common element in the accounts that Moody studied is the BEING OF LIGHT. I confess that it is difficult to fathom this phenomenon – something that is both BEING and LIGHT. The people in Moody’s study also report that the BEING had a “very definite personality”. They describe the personality as emanating love and warmth beyond description – a love that completely surrounded the dying person such that the feeling of ease and acceptance was unmistakable. In many cases, the dying person reported a sense of “irresistible magnetic attraction to the light”. Now, that part (the personality description) is not difficult to fathom because that is similar to my experience with Christ. I’ve never had a “white light” Jesus moment. But something about the name, Jesus, puts me in a loving mind and warms my heart. I feel an irresistible magnetic attraction to the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus and not just as a student of theology but as a student of LIFE. Something about the name Jesus reminds me in times of darkness that there is light at the end of the dark tunnel.

It’s important to note here that not every person in Moody’s study identified the being of light as Christ. But, most of the people who identified themselves as Christian in training or belief did call the light Christ. People from other faith traditions identified the light as an “angel”. No wings. No halo. No harp. By angel they meant a “guide”. A guide who asked the question, “What have you done with your life up to this point?” The question was not asked to condemn or accuse or threaten. Instead, the question was aimed to empower the dying person to think about his or her life – to help a person proceed along the path to truth. It’s an intriguing notion that death is not the end of the path; but a crossroad where we contemplate our next steps in the embrace and presence of a loving BEING OF LIGHT.

This morning our gospel reading included a reference to the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a Jewish group who were similar to the chief priests and leaders of the people in ancient Jerusalem. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection...they did not believe in angels (nor wings, nor halos, nor harps). What they believed is that when a man dies, he continues to live ONLY in his male offspring.

So you can hear their disdain for the resurrection notion in the way they question Jesus. The question sounds more like a comedy routine than an earnest inquiry. "Teacher, if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, that man should marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. BUT, what if there were seven brothers...and the first brother married the widow and died childless and the second brother married the widow and died childless and so on until all seven brothers were dead. And then the widow herself died childless as well. In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?" If that whole line of inquiry sounds ridiculous, good! That is the spirit of the question. The Sadducees are thumbing their noses at Jesus...poking fun at the idea of COMING BACK.

But, Jesus responds with such dignity even in the face of mockery. He tries to teach the Sadducees that those who believe in resurrection **overcome death**. For those who SUSPEND THEIR DISBELIEF (as I have suggested you do this morning) "there is no need to marry or to be given in marriage because they cannot die anymore...they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." Okay, that's not proof. But, it's an intriguing notion, however. It's an interesting possibility that death does not mean termination...but transformation.

Consider the witness of the people in Moody's study. Obviously, all of the people he interviewed CAME BACK at some point in the experience of dying. And Moody noted a change in their attitude as the result of the crossing over. When I read the composite experience earlier, you may remember that as the dying person began to leave his body, he was in a state of emotional distress. Often times, according to the study, there is extreme regret over one's demise and an intense desire to get back into the body. But, when the dying person reaches a certain point in the experience, he or she does not want to come back, especially those who encounter the BEING OF LIGHT. One person said, "I NEVER wanted to leave the presence of this being!"

And, yet, they were revived...resuscitated...resurrected. Some of them claimed that they made the decision to return, having left some important task undone; or that God sent them back for a specific purpose – to finish school or to help a spouse. Some of them believed that the love or prayers of others pulled them back. In any case, people were changed when they came back. As you might imagine, they acquired new attitudes toward life...many became more reflective and more concerned with life's ultimate meaning. They developed new views concerning physical death. Many reported that they were no longer afraid of death. And...these folks revised their description of the "afterlife". Not one of them described pearly gates or golden streets -- no fiery hell with devils and pitchforks. In fact, the idea that you are "rewarded" or "punished" didn't make as much sense as before. They began to imagine instead that the review

of life (at the end of life or at any time along the journey) could be done in a spirit of ‘growing up’ and ‘growing towards’ a more fully developed INNER SELF!

I told you that the point of this sermon was to invite you to suspend your disbelief and point your imagination in a new direction. When we pray...and as we worship...the result is not always that we receive answers. Many times what we receive is the permission to ask questions. What do you require of us, O God? Are we forgiven? What is your will for our lives today? Are you listening, O God? Is there life after life? We can only imagine.

I leave you with a few lyrics from a song entitled, I Can Only Imagine, by Mercy Me. The song found me last week as I was preparing to preach and it really says succinctly all that I’m trying to say about the possibility of life after life:

I can only imagine
What it will be like
When I walk
By Your side
I can only imagine
What my eyes will see
When Your face
Is before me
I can only imagine
Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel?
Will I stand in Your presence?
Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all?
When that day comes
When I find myself standing in the Sun
I can only imagine when all I will do
Is forever worship You

Amen