

Sermon
Easter 2-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
April 11, 2021
William Bradbury

Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

Mary Neal is an orthopedic surgeon practicing in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. In 1999 she goes with her husband to kayak the Fuy River in Chile. As she goes over the first 10-foot waterfall, she writes:

"I rapidly dropped into the turbulence below and predictably plunged deep below the water's surface. But then I came to a sudden and sickening stop when the front end of my boat became jammed in the underwater features. I remained upright in my boat instead of being flipped upside down, but instead of quickly popping back to the surface, I was stuck under six to eight feet of water that quickly closed over my head."

She says, "the force of the current bent my torso forward. I had no air pocket and no time to spare...and I began to realize then what would actually happen. I would drown."

Then she says she felt peaceful and able to pray that God's will be done, and that, "**The moment I relinquished my future to God's will, I felt the physical sensation of being held and comforted by Jesus....**

"Jesus assured me that every thing was fine, that my husband would be fine, and my young children would be fine, regardless of whether I lived or died. **It felt as though Jesus was pouring his boundless love, kindness, compassion, and mercy into my very soul.**"

She says, "Eventually the current ripped off my helmet from my head and my life jacket from my body. My knees were forced to bend forward, breaking bones and tearing ligaments in the process, yet I felt no pain."

"As my body was leaving my boat, I could also feel something else happening—Jesus was releasing me, and my spirit was slowly separating from my body. Suddenly I felt my spirit release with a small pop. The separation was painless, gentle, and beautiful. I never experience being conscious one moment and unconscious the next.... I had a heightened

clarity and intensity of consciousness, and I felt more alive than I had ever felt....”

“What I remember is this: gracefully rising up out of the river, feeling freedom and lightness as the water fell away from my outstretched arms, and feeling the brilliant sunshine that seemed to pull me upward...until I could look down on the entire scene.

I was not afraid. With God’s perfect love so profoundly present, fear had no room to exist. As I hovered above the river, I was welcomed by “somethings” ...a group...of people, spirits, angels, or soul friends....I was filled with an inexpressible peace and joy that makes life on Earth seem pale and unappealing by comparison. I felt like I had finally returned home.”

But I still hadn’t left Earth. Not yet.... The past, present, and future all seemed to merge into one reality. I seemed to be in a different spatial dimension as well. But all the while, I was able to look down on the scene at the river.

There is much more you can read in Mary Neal’s two books, but suffice it to say she was told by her spirit friends that it wasn’t her time yet and she had to return to her lifeless body which had been under water for almost 30 minutes and then dragged up onto the river bank by her friends....”

For me the most important thing about her NDE is that experience radically changed her life. After multiple surgeries and rehab for her broken legs she returned to family and her orthopedic practice, but as a person transformed.

She writes: “Most of us who have had this sort of profound spiritual experience hold an unwavering belief that we have experienced something of immeasurable significance about the purpose of life.... Most experiencers lose all fear of death but gain a universal belief in life after death.”

7 Lessons from Heaven. See also her first book To Heaven and Back

 Bruce Greyson, recently retired Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine and a leading NDE researcher for the past 40 years says most find this experience radically shapes their lives going forward: of the experiencers he’s studied, three-fourths reported a marked change in their lifestyle and activities and one third changed their occupations.” After, page 187

 Mary’s story offers us a way to understand our gospel account today:

“When it was evening... and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them....”

Instead of the disciples experiencing the divine realm through a near death experience, the crucified and risen Jesus brings the divine realm to the disciples: he gives them God’s Peace, fills them with Holy Spirit, empowers them to forgive sins, and sends them out with souls filled with heaven.

THIS ENCOUNTER RADICALLY ALTERS THEIR LIVES, not just for a few weeks but for the rest of their lives. **Now they live in a community that shares everything in common** and has the courage to proclaim Jesus and the Resurrection, not only in Jerusalem but also in Rome.

In this context we can understand Thomas: he doesn’t have the experience on that first Sunday night, so he cannot share in their transformation—but then the following week he has the experience and is transformed. An ancient tradition says Thomas took the story of Jesus and the Resurrection to India.

But what about those of us who have never had such a radical experience of the Divine Realm? Are we left out in the cold? Are we only left with the thin gruel of being religious on the outside while dying spiritually on the inside?

Not at all, for you and I have experiences daily of the divine realm—in coincidences, intuitions, healings, and blessings. Some we notice and others we don’t, since we have been taught by a secular worldview such things aren’t real.

The foundation of faith is the experience of the Divine Realm—“Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”—holding our lives, so we grow in the realization this world is immersed in God.

To put it philosophically, Jesus and the Resurrection reveal that the manifest world of people and things, all creation, is supported at every point and in each moment by the Unmanifest world of Spirit who is Love Divine.

Therefore, you and I do not have to see the Risen Christ, nor do we have to have a Near Death Experience: what we need is to practice every day **trusting Jesus and the apostles when they announce that the Divine Realm is here—among us and within us and then pay attention to our lives.**

Then we will know Jesus is also talking to us when he says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.**"