

Falling and not afraid

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



Our living and our dying are great mysteries.

Not long ago a young reporter contacted me wanting to talk about death. She had suddenly come to the realization that she would one day die. She wanted to know what happens to

us when we die, was there life after death and what did Scripture say about heaven? These are meta-questions.

I know how I felt when I was 28. I didn't want to die. My whole life was ahead of me. I couldn't accept that there was a limit to my time on earth. And there was a bit of a fear factor. What would happen to me? What if there was not a resurrection? Would death be painful? Did my life have meaning? I felt a little guilty about these doubts and fears because I was already ordained—I should be steadfast in my faith and have no doubts about my ultimate future. But I did.

Here is what I learned from my experience at that time in my life: Life is precious and beautiful and, even in its painfulness, something to be fiercely protected. Also, doubt is not the opposite of faith but is part of faith. Doubt and questions can lead us to clearer understanding and deeper faith.

Based on our tradition's conviction that it is God's gracious will to be merciful, that God intends good for all people and all creation, that no amount of good deeds or of bad will determine God's relationship with us, or our eternal future—this is God's work, God's grace—I tried to answer the reporter's questions.

Lutheran Christians do believe in life after this earthly one. Paul wrote: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by

the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:3-5).


There are many passages in Scripture that speak about heaven—beautiful descriptions of reconciled humanity singing praises to God, the end of mourning and crying and pain and death, and the beauty of the heavenly city. And we hear God's fulfilled promise: "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

Our living and our dying are great mysteries. The images of heaven we read in Scripture are the best and inspired efforts of the finite to describe the infinite. Human language and understanding are too small. But I am sure of this: God is love. God's love is infinite and complete. In this life we only get a foretaste of that. When our earthly life is done we will be enfolded in that love and loved completely by the one who knows us completely.

Paul put it this way: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

My spiritual director told me this story. There was a woman who missed her footing in the dark and fell out of an open hotel room window. She clung desperately to the ledge all night, only to see at sunrise that she was 6 inches from the ground the whole time.

Our lives are like that—trying to hold on no matter what, not believing that God is there ready to receive us.

I thought about that for a while and only later came to realize that I am falling and not afraid. I don't know what will come next in this life. I can't definitively describe heaven. But I do know my life is in God's hands. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.

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