



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# You Will See Him

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:5-7).*

Dr. Eben Alexander is a neurosurgeon who had a near death experience in 2008. More people have near death experiences these days, or NDEs as they're called, because doctors are able to bring so many back from the brink of death. What makes Dr. Alexander's tale so interesting is that he's a brain surgeon and he says that, according to medical science, he should not have been able to have the kinds of experiences he had, given what was happening to his brain at the time. He wrote about it in a book called *Proof of Heaven*, and he'll be our first speaker next fall in the new season of Town Hall South.

Since his first book came out, lots of people have written to tell Dr. Alexander about their own experiences. People tend to keep those kinds of things to themselves until others share what happened to them, and then they feel as though they have permission to tell their own stories. He says he finds more and more similarities between what people are telling him today and what people of the past believed. Many of these stories, in fact, sound like the sort of thing you might expect if you really believed that the

story of Easter is true.

More people show up in church on Easter than any other Sunday, but that doesn't necessarily mean everyone believes the story. People come to church for all kinds of reasons, but lots of folks still have their doubts. It doesn't take any particular genius to recognize that, physically speaking, dead people stay dead, and therefore to wonder whether God really did raise Jesus up on Easter, and if so, how exactly that relates to us. Any thoughtful twelve-year-old might wonder about such things.

Doubts and questions are the obvious responses to the Easter story. They are today, and they were when the women and men who claimed to see the risen Lord first told the world what they saw. "We did not follow cleverly devised myths," Peter says, and the fact that he has to say it means that the notion was already circulating by the time the New Testament was written. Paul knows that the gospel sounds like "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles." But as the first letter of John says, "We declare to you ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ...."

Eben Alexander quotes the Swiss psychoanalyst Dr. Carl Jung, who said toward the end of his life, "I don't *believe* in God. I *know*." Jung broke with Freud over several things, not least because Freud was so dismissive of religion. Freud thought that religious

beliefs are just wishful thinking, that people make up things they want to believe in order to handle their anxieties and fears—which, by the way, is a notion at least as old as Plato, hundreds of years before Jesus walked this earth. But Jung knew that people have all sorts of spiritual experiences that are not so easily dismissed.

The night before last, on Good Friday, I was called to the hospital to be with a friend from another church whose wife had just died. Later that night we were talking, and he said the same thing Carl Jung had said: “I don’t believe these things. I just *know*.” This is a man who’s experienced some remarkable things himself, including a great, sudden surge of energy that cured him of cancer many years ago. We talked about how God turns up in so many ways, in good times and bad, that faith becomes no longer just a matter of opinion or belief but the central reality of our lives.

At our retreat last month, some people related portions of their own experience—wonderful things that happened to them and other things that were very difficult at the time. Some involved physical or emotional or spiritual healing in ways that left no doubt in their minds about the goodness and love of God. They were the kinds of stories that have happened to people ever since the Bible was written.

Some people hear these stories and they ask, “Why doesn’t that kind of thing ever happen to me?” The fact that they’ve never experienced such things

themselves makes them skeptical about other people's claims—though when you think about it, that's a pretty illogical leap, isn't it? Why should I imagine that just because something hasn't happened to me it probably hasn't happened to anybody else? All sorts of things happen to other people that don't happen to us. We read about them in the news and hear stories from friends and neighbors and people at work, and we take their word for it. Why should we assume that spiritual experiences are not real, just because they haven't yet come to us?

One of the things that struck me on our retreat was how we share one another's experiences in the Christian community, and in that sense we participate in them ourselves. When someone has a great healing we celebrate with him, and when somebody else is going through a hard time we sympathize with her and keep her in our prayers. The Bible tells us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep," but we just do that naturally with one another in the body of Christ. People talk about their church family, and how important it is, especially when we need each other for support. And our sharing draws us out of ourselves, and frees us from ourselves—in contrast to those nagging, narcissistic questions: "Why don't all these good things happen to me?" or "Why did this bad thing have to happen to me?"

Dr. Alexander's most recent book, called *The Map of Heaven*, tells some of the stories people shared with him. One woman says that as her father was dying

he released all his rage over losing control onto her mother, leaving her feeling bereft because she really loved him. But the daughter prayed that her father would feel some love piercing through his anger, and that her mother would know that he would be all right. One day before he died, her father suddenly grabbed her mother's hand and told her how much he loved her and all their family. Then, a few weeks after he died, her mother said, "three nights ago I awoke and your father was sitting at the end of my bed." "Was it a dream?" she asked. "No. He was more real than you are. And he looked to be 45 years old. He looked at me with such love, such complete love, that I knew he was waiting for me." And the daughter was struck by the peace that came over her mother, and the permanent change the experience made in her.

Dr. Alexander's book is full of stories like that, as are lots of other books. The title of his first book is a little misleading, though, because of course none of this really amounts to a "proof" of heaven. But proof is a higher standard than we apply to most things we believe, and the truth is, these stories are consistent with what Christianity has claimed all the way back to Easter itself.

I've known so many people with similar stories, some near death and others far from death, and I've had enough experiences of my own, that I agree with Carl Jung and my friend on Good Friday: after a while, faith stops being a matter of mere belief and becomes another kind of knowing. It's about a reality you can



wrap your whole life around, and find the courage and strength and joy and peace to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart.

Dr. Alexander summarizes his experience of heaven as telling him three things: “We are loved. We are known. We belong.” Lots of people spend their whole lives wishing those things were true. The gospel tells us that they are true, and you can believe them, until the day comes when you see Jesus face to face.

That mysterious young man at the tomb said that the disciples would see Jesus very soon. And you will see him, too, if the gospel story is true. To live in that expectation is the joy and the promise and the hope of Easter.

As St. Catherine of Sienna said, “It’s heaven all the way to heaven.” That doesn’t mean the way will always be easy. But Christ will be with us, come what may, and that will make this life full of surprises, even as it prepares us for infinitely greater things to come.



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