

Embraced By the Light

Easter Sunday

Text: I Corinthians 15:54, 57; Psalms 116:8; Mark 16:6

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It's good to celebrate the resurrection. This is not really a day for preaching. It's a day for witnessing to a wonderful truth. It's a day for praising and praying and singing and dancing. And the service is laced with all of that, and eventually we will come to receive the tangible sign of God's everlasting love as we take bread and cup: an invitation to you to come to this table, for the Lord is risen, He is risen indeed. And we celebrate in bread and cup that ongoing life of Christ that is ours.

This is a day in which we celebrate the fact that we now and forever are *Embraced By The Light*. The title of the message was intended to hook you if you had been aware of this book *Embraced By The Light*, by Betty J. Eadie. This book has sold in the thousands and, when I realized that it had become a phenomena in our day, I thought, what better to do on Easter than simply to celebrate what is celebrated in this book—the story of a near death experience and eternity being packed into those few moments in which insights were learned and intuitions were satisfied and fulfilled as Betty Eadie testifies to her grand tour of heaven, her encounter with Jesus Christ, even her encounter with God.

Well, *Embraced By The Light* happens to be a phenomena in our day. The other day I got an article, which Nancy cut out for me. It was from the *Detroit Free Press* of a couple weeks ago entitled, "Spiritual Books Touch Many Readers". She knew that I was going to refer to that book, and this article speaks about that book and *Where Angels Walk* and *The Celestine Prophecy*, and it goes on to describe what has got to be a trend and probably a fad of rather large proportions in our day of people who are witnessing to the fact that there is something deep down in us that wants to know what lies beyond, whether there is something more, or whether this is all there is. In last Sunday's *New York Times* book review, as I opened up to the back, I recognized that in terms of the hard cover books that are out there, there is a fiction book *The Celestine Prophecy*, about an ancient manuscript found in Peru that provides insight into achieving a fulfilling life. That's a novel. It's number two in the fiction column. But in the non-fiction column, number three is *How We Die*, a physician and surgeon reflecting on life's

final chapter. Number one is *Embraced By The Light*. Forty-six weeks on the list. Then, once the hard covers are out and you go to the paperbacks, some books just keep selling. Here in the paperback best seller's non-fiction is number one: *Care of the Soul*, by Thomas Moore, whose latest book is on the other list number four or five, *Soul Mates*. Number two, *The Road Less Traveled*, by Scott Peck with which many of you are familiar, 542 weeks on the best seller list. How would you like the royalties on that one? Number four, *Where Angels Walk*, by Joan Wester-Anderson, stories about angelic interventions in human affairs.

Now folks, this is not *The Christian Century* or *Christianity Today*, this is *The New York Times* Book Review list, and it evidences to the fact that there is a widespread yearning in the human heart to pierce the veil and to determine an answer to that primal question within us. Is this all there is? Or, is there something more? There is a whole world out there beyond the parameters of the organized church and institutional religion, people who perhaps long since have given up on religion per se, but who cannot finally deny that question that in our day has erupted again with a fury. What lies beyond the veil? Is there something more? Or, is this all there is?

I began to look at that literature again; some of it I've had around for a long time. It was 1970 when Elizabeth Kiebler-Ross the Swiss psychiatrist wrote her book on death and dying, the consequence of interviewing terminally ill patients to see the stages through which they went as they came to terms with the fact that they would die. It was 1975 when another psychiatrist Raymond Moody wrote the book *Life After Life*, documenting 150 cases of near death experiences, these out of the body experiences, as *Embraced By The Light* tells Mary Eadie's experience.

Then, I remembered that in 1983 at the University of Michigan I had listened to the Catholic theologian, Hans Küng talk about "Eternal life?"—question mark—with all of these questions: death?, and hell?, and heaven?, purgatory and judgment?, etc. He begins with this near death experience and he examines that and he's writing an account from somewhere and it sounds a little bit like it could have come out of *Embraced By The Light*, and I'm thinking where is Küng getting this story, only to find, as I concluded the paragraphs that recount this experience, that it was written by none other than the Greek philosopher Plato, twenty-five hundred years ago in Book X of *The Republic*. As Küng points out, you can document this from Indian philosophy and in religious writings from ancient Egypt across the world, across the generations, universally—there is this question. Is this all there is? Or is there something more?

Well, Easter is the day in which in the Christian church we bear witness to our conviction that this is not all there is. But, rather, that the best is yet to be. On the dawn of Easter morning when Christ arose, he became for us a light that illumines our life backwards and forwards. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian Gospel. We worship not only on Easter morning but every first day of the week in celebration of that event. Every Sunday is a little

Easter. It is the very heart and center of the Christian message. In Mark's account simply, "He is not here. He is risen." St. Paul says, "Death is swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I don't know whether the Psalmist had a near death experience or not. I am sure they didn't call it 'clinically dead' at that time, but he speaks about being "enwrapped in the snares of the hades, of Sheol . . . the pangs of hell that hold upon me," he says. And then he praises God and says, "You have saved my eyes from tears. My soul from death. My feet from falling." So the Psalm is a Psalm of praise in which he begins, "I love the Lord." Well, who loves the Lord? The person who has been touched deeply in the depths of their being, the person who has had some life-transforming experience.

The Apostle Paul says, "I show you a mystery, and it is a mystery, it is a mystery about which none of us know in terms of scientific verification. It's not for verifying. But the person who has had a deep experience finds themselves transformed. I had wished that Betty Eadie had been a bit more modest. She learned an awful lot in those moments. My goodness, what she learned! However, she doesn't know, and I don't know, and you don't know, but her life was changed. Thank God, she used her experience in order to call people to kindness, to say that ultimately all is love, and apart from love there is nothing.

Embraced By The Light, yes indeed! That's the Easter message. That's what we celebrate today—the gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News about life beyond life, and both are important, and both perhaps should receive equal emphasis. Life beyond life—this is the life—and the best is yet to be. That's the story of Easter. And as I reflect on that I recognize that the Church has this marvelous message that the center of it is the Gospel, and that means Good News. Then I realize that the whole world out there is so hungry, yearning for some answer, some peek through the veil. And I say to myself, "If we have the Good News, and if the world is longing for that news, why have we become so much the place of bad news in the minds of so many of the human family? If the world is asking the question and the heart of our faith is the answer, why . . . why has the Church been identified with legalisms and moralisms and oughts and shoulds and musts? Why has the Church been identified with the imposition of guilt and the exploitation of that guilt with threat, with the fear of judgment and the possibility of hell? Why? If Easter is our day, if it is the heart of our message, if this is the question that finally will not be dissolved in the human mind and heart, then must we not become once again a place of Good News?

A few years ago I coined a phrase for Christ Community, calling it "An alternative to church as usual." I'm wondering if we have to be even more radical than that? The Christian tradition is a grand tradition, but with all of the baggage of the Church that we get brushed with, perhaps it should be the "Unchurch," like the "Uncola," so that we could separate ourselves from all of that that is so dark, so

dismal, so miserable. I mean, the world longs to know this, but somehow or other, the way we have packaged it, the message isn't getting through. And what a message it is. Look at Jesus. Look at that life. Just look at that life. We've gone seriously through that life again in this Lenten season. What a life! What a man! What integrity, what strength, what grace, what love! What a life! I can understand that the writer of the fourth Gospel would say, "This is the way, this is the truth, this is the life. No one will come to the Father except that way, with that truth and that kind of a life."

What a life . . . and what a death. Look at the shadow side of the whole human condition, which comes to expression in the crucifixion of such a life. Then today, what a story: He lives, not because of him, not because of any human possibility, but because God will not give up, because God will not abandon creation, because God will not let us go. There is life beyond life because it's God's gift, and God will never quit.

This past week I visited the nursing homes where a number of our people live in various states and conditions. I must say to you this morning, if you are young and able bodied, doing well, prospects good, go ahead and deny the question or nibble around the edges of a bit of cynicism, but if you would walk the halls of the nursing homes with me, up and down the halls with me, you would see concentrated in that place — what is the end of this human experience, physically, biologically, physiologically. The question would press in upon you and you would say then too, "Is this all there is? Is there nothing more?"

My word to our dear people in nursing homes this week was simply this: This is not the final stop. This is not the last chapter. Thank God Easter is coming, and the best is yet to be. And, by God, I believe it! I believe it! *Credo*. That Latin word that says *I believe*. I don't know, but by God, I believe it!