

**Text:** John 14:1-6 & 1 Corinthians 15  
**Date:** May 16, 2010  
**Title:** The End of LOST: “What happens when we die?”  
**Theme:** The Christian belief in heaven and a Resurrection is simply an extension of our belief in Christ’s presence with us throughout our lives.

Let me share something with you from an article in the May 24, 2010 edition of *Time* magazine on the end of LOST:

“Why are we here? It doesn’t get much bigger than that for a TV drama. ‘The finale is tremendously spiritual,’ says co-star [Matthew] Fox [who plays Jack Shephard.] ‘It becomes much more character-driven and focused on some of the big philosophical questions: What’s the nature of humanity? What happens when we die?’”<sup>1</sup>

The author names two of our three weeks’ worth of sermons in one paragraph – so we’re not the only ones making these connections

What happens when we die? is perhaps the most important question of all for us as humans who know that someday, sometime all of us will die. Now we can dodge the question – we can go through our lives pretending that these aren’t important – that we just don’t care.

We can conclude that what comes after is unknowable, and so that therefore what happens here and now, how we live here and now, is the only thing that matters.

But sooner or later we brush up against mortality – either our own or with someone we love.

When I considered this series, I didn’t know my Dad was going to die. But I can’t imagine having gone through that thinking there was nothing – having no faith in God or a heaven.

It occurs to me that we had better know what we believe.

Now I know some people – including some in this congregation - who have gotten a glimpse of the promise firsthand

B/c there are people who have been that close: who have been dead, for seconds or minutes, and come back

From time to time, I’ll hear those stories – firsthand – of the bright light – the sense of peacefulness – they’re remarkably similar

Anyone who has worked with the dying knows that there's something beyond this life, b/c when people are dying, strange things happen – folks will often talk to those who have gone before  
Clearly *something* is happening

LOST has been asking this question almost from the beginning – remember I told you that one of the special things about this island, the place where the survivors of a plane crash find themselves – is a place where the living and the dead interact

This week, I want to introduce you to another character. This is Richard Alpert – played by Nestor Carbonell – who up until this season has been kind of a man of mystery

He's one of the 'Others' – people that were on the island before the plane crash

He doesn't age, he doesn't die – we learned this season that he arrived on board a slave ship going from the Canary Islands to the New World in 1867 – he was shipwrecked – and yet he still looks to be forty-ish

If you go to the website, you'll find a link to an episode from this season (season 6) called "Ab Aeterno" (from eternity) – one of my favorites of all time – and it tells Richard – actually Ricardo's – backstory in detail

Richard is married, and his wife Isabella is dying of TB

You see her burning up with fever, and he rides to the nearest doctor hours away

He asks for help, for medicine – but the guy can't be bothered – he doesn't want to ride out in the rain

He will sell Richard the medicine (which is worthless b/c there was no medicine to treat TB then) – but when he sees how poor Richard is, he's not interested

Richard takes him by the lapels to plead with him, there's a scuffle, the man falls backward, hits his head on the table, and is dead

In the next scene, Richard is in prison, awaiting hanging in the morning

He is visited by a priest, who offers to hear his confession but who, after hearing it, will offer him no absolution

"I'm afraid the devil awaits you in hell," he says.

Richard becomes convinced that the island really is hell – that he has died  
When he is first shipwrecked – his wife visits him (remember, living and the dead interact) and says as much

But he hasn't seen her since

Richard is convinced he's in hell because here he is, living forever, with no absolution, no forgiveness, without being able to connect to anyone he loves – it does sound like hell, doesn't it?

In fact, this season we see Richard so desperate to end his existence he's looking for ways to die

Guilt, abandonment, leaving the ones we love behind – these are some of the issues we face, some of the things we fear when we begin to think about death

It was said of the early Methodists that they knew how to die well – in other words, their faith gave them the opportunity to turn death into a message of hope for those who were with them

Famously, John Wesley's last words were, "The best of all is, God is with us." That's about as true and good a confession as faith as there is. After all, what's another name for Jesus but Emmanuel: "God with us"? That's the essence of Christianity, that God has chosen to walk with humanity.

In the gospel passage we read earlier – one that's read at most every funeral – Jesus is speaking with his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he goes to the cross

In the face of his own death, Jesus offers the disciples – who don't yet understand what must happen – a promise

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:1-3, NRSV)

Three essential things Jesus says here:

- 1) Don't allow death to frighten you – "do not let your hearts be troubled"
- 2) I go to prepare a place for you – Jesus is looking out for us

Most importantly:

- 3) Where I am, there you may be also – Jesus' role as Emmanuel, God with us – extends beyond this life

It's part of Christ's very nature and therefore *his* nature doesn't change just because *our* mortal bodies die

God is with us – no matter what – just like Wesley said  
Paul agrees – in one of the most powerful passages in the whole Bible,  
from Romans 8:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,  
nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all  
creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our  
Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

So we've established that the question is important, that there is something  
beyond death, and that no matter what, if we believe, Christ goes with  
us

What else can we say about what comes after this life?

Well, we have to recognize that while we can know some things for certain,  
like Christ goes with us, there is still a great mystery here for us  
Like the old saying goes: "beware the preacher who proposes to describe  
the furniture in heaven or the temperature of hell"

And one of the reasons that it's difficult to put your hands around it  
precisely is because the scriptures themselves show a development  
in thoughts around what happens when we die

For example, in the Old Testament, the predominant image of the world of  
the dead is summed up in the Hebrew world Sheol

Sheol is kind of like the counterpart to Hades in Greek mythology

It is under the earth – you "go down to Sheol" (Job 7:9) – it's also known  
simply as "the Pit" (Job 33)

People exist there as shades or spirits, but there's not a great sense of  
consciousness – Psalm 88 calls it "the land of forgetfulness" (88:12)

Not very hopeful at all

But as you read further, as you get into later books like Daniel, you start to  
see the beginnings of what became a widespread belief among Jews  
of Jesus' time – that there would be a resurrection (Daniel 12:2)

It was a hot-button theological issue, in fact – the New Testament talks  
about how the Pharisees believed in resurrection, and the Sadducees  
did not (Acts 23:8)

Still, for the most part – while we know the resurrection of Jesus' is important to our faith (although it's also true that churches aren't nearly as full on Easter as they are on Christmas Eve) we don't tend to think that much about *our own* resurrection

We think more in terms of our souls in heaven – which is something more of a Greek concept

That's unfortunate, because resurrection is the fundamental hope of the New Testament

Paul says it best in Romans: "For if we have been united with [Jesus] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

(Romans 6:5)

Paul, in fact, has all the best passages on resurrection, including this one we read from earlier – 1 Corinthians 15 – nearly the entire chapter is devoted to the subject

The reason we didn't read all of it is because it's long – almost 60 verses  
We just hit the highlights - I hope you will take the time to read it at some point this week

Paul's message is this: the dead await a day, the return of Christ, where they will be raised – as the scripture says – the righteous to life, and the unrighteous to punishment

On that day, our souls will be reunited with our bodies – the connection that was severed by death will be re-made, in a much more glorious and perfect way

Here's what Paul says:

"So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown [i.e., buried] is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body...What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.... When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44a, 50, 54)

Why does this matter though? Why do we care what happens to our bodies? We already have said that no matter what, God is with us, and we're with God

Again, going back to Paul, as he thinks about his own mortality in 2 Corinthians, he says, "we would rather be away from the body, and at home with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:8)

While he confesses the resurrection at the end of time, he fully expects that at the moment of death, he will be with God – just like we said before

So why does resurrection matter at all? Well, here's why:

First, this is the true New Testament hope – resurrection. What's true for Jesus is true for his followers. We hope not to be disembodied, but more perfectly bodied – “we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed” Paul goes on to say in that passage from 2 Corinthians (5:4) This is important when we talk about things going in society today, like the debate about health care. Because it says God cares about the body. What we do with our bodies, how we as a society care for bodies – it matters.

But most importantly, and most amazingly – what's being promised here in the resurrection is even greater than what can imagine.

Because even though Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43) – implying that we go immediately to heaven to be with him – the fact that our resurrection is still out there as a future hope says there's something even better than paradise awaiting us

Can you imagine? Something better than paradise?

Still, this is exactly what we're promised

Not only that Christ continues to be 'Emmanuel,' God with us, in death as in life – which in and of itself is hope sufficient for us, to get us through anything

But you know what? God, in Jesus Christ, even goes beyond that to promise us that what awaits us in the Resurrection is even far better than that

Truly, friends, this is the good news

And not just the good news – the best news of all

Amen and amen.

By Joe Monahan, Succasunna United Methodist Church

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<sup>1</sup> James Poniewozik, *Time Magazine*, May 24, 2010, p.43.