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West Valley Presbyterian Church

A Year of Testimony & Praise

The Promise of Heaven

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Sometimes we need to be encouraged in the Lord. Jesus was a master at encouraging the faint hearted, the weak, the troubled, the weary. And I think some of us may be a little troubled and weary today. As some of you know, we've lost some long time faithful members just recently, one right after the other. People whom we loved and whom we miss very much. And we've lost others, who are known to just a few of you...family members, and friends of folks who attend here. And also, some of you are caring for members of your family who you know won't be around for much longer...and its more of a slow loss of someone who you love who is not what they once were. Others of you are mourning for people you love who have died 3, 4, 5 years ago. That's to be expected.

There are seasons to life. There is a time to mourn...and we can't rush that process. We can't feel better the next day after a loved one dies. And we shouldn't feel guilty for taking the time that we need to mourn. (Sharon Stellars...illustration) Someone once said that...

Life for everyone is a terminal disease...cause we are all moving towards death.

Our bodies are aging...from the youngest to the oldest...*look around*...be honest...maybe so and so doesn't look as good as they used to (*don't tell them, just notice*)...we are aging...all of us - even kids are aging...they don't feel it but some of us who are older can really feel it...

Like the elderly man who woke up one morning and turned to kiss his wife...and she protested. "Don't touch me!" She said. "I'm dead". "What do you mean your dead?" he said. "You are perfectly fine. We're lying here talking to each other. You aren't dead!" She said "No, I'm dead. I'm sure of it." "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I woke up this morning and nothing hurts!"

What she was really saying is..."I am perfectly alive! Nothing is weighing me down. I feel great!"

So this morning I am here to encourage you with the glorious promises from scripture that assure us time and time again that for those of us are Christians...we don't need to worry about death - that there is a heaven where we are going... where we will feel fully alive. ...That's because Jesus has taken death and conquered it through the cross. He has promised us that when this life is over...there's a new day coming.

I want to tell you a little bit about what that "new day" is going to be like today. A lot of people will say when someone dies that "he or she is in a better place" but that's a little vague. So I want to share with you what the Bible says about that "better place" so you can put some meat on the bones of your faith this morning. Get a glimpse of heaven...so that when you walk out of here you might actually think "Wow...I have a lot to look forward to."

The first thing I want you to know about heaven is there's a T a new day coming when we will discover that...

HEAVEN IS OUR TRUE HOME : That's what the scripture tells us. I want us all to read the scripture together Julie read earlier.

(READ JOHN 14:1-4) Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God^[a]; believe also in me. ²My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going."

Home is a place where you can be yourself. Home is where you can take off your necktie & kick off those tight pumps that are squeezing your feet. Home is where you can say what you are thinking. Home is where you're always accepted & loved no matter what you do. You're not just a guest. You are a resident. You live there. That is where you belong. Sometimes after a long day at work, or when you are tired from the day for any reason, can't you just wait to get home?

Malcolm Muggeridge who was an outspoken Christian in the early 1900's put looking forward to heaven this way...

"Like a prisoner awaiting his release, like a school boy when the end of term is near, like a migrant bird ready to fly south, like a patient in [the] hospital anxiously scanning the doctor's face to see whether a discharge may be expected, I long (for heaven). Extricating myself from the flesh I have too long inhabited, hearing the key turn in the

lock of Time so that the great doors of eternity swing open... Such is the prospect of (heaven)."

Jesus is saying in John 14..."Guess what? It's all good. You've got a lot to look forward to. Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't worry about this thing called death. When you die...I'm going to take you to My Father's house, which is my home & its your real home, too. Its where you belong because you belong to me..."

He says, "In My Father's house are many rooms." The KJV version says, "many mansions." Maybe some of you have learned it like that. You might like that word. But "mansion" is not really the best translation of the Greek word Jesus used. Probably the best is "dwelling place" or "rooms."

You see, the word that Jesus used comes from the Eastern custom that when a son grew up & got married in that culture, he then would bring his bride back home again.

(It seems like that's happening now a days too. Young adults married and poor moving back in with folks - kind of a national trend...anyway...what goes around comes around.)

But back in that day, when a son would return home with his bride, it was expected that the father would actually at that point add another room onto his house for them.

No need to go apartment hunting. No security deposit with one month rent necessary. Nope. It was all prepared ahead of time and free of charge...Family for *better or worse*...lived under one roof together, and they all took care of each other. That's just the way it was done.

Then when another son grew up & got married, another room got added. The house just kept getting bigger & bigger, as the family got larger and everyone stayed together.

"In My Father's house," Jesus said, "are many rooms..." - in other words you are my child, you are a part of my family...and I am going to build another room for you - prepare a place for you where I live ...then I will come back and take you to be with me....so that we can be together."

He doesn't even just say to us "Here's the address...GPS it...or ask Siri to give you directions" He actually says I am *going to come back and get you* and take you to be with me. For those

of us like me who are directionally challenged, that's a huge comfort. But...It indicates for us the assurance that when we die as followers of Christ there is not one moment when we are lost, or alone. That Jesus meets us right at the point of death and ushers us home. Second, there's a new day coming when....

II. We will see our loved ones again

We will recognize them; We will be able to communicate with them.

This is a worry and concern that people always ask me about.

People fear that they won't recognize their loved ones or be able to speak with them. That we will all be in a different state entirely. But there is no need to fear this. First off, there are countless near death experiences of people who see their loved ones waiting for them, or welcoming them home...

The book "90 Minutes in Heaven" (a best seller with 3.5 million copies sold) was written by a pastor who, I actually got to meet at a conference this February - Don Piper - was a pastor who was in a fatal car accident - a head on collision with a bus on a bridge. He was instantly killed and was dead for 90 minutes.

He had no pulse and the EMT's pulled a tarp up over his face. He was just a corpse waiting in the ambulance to be taken to the morgue – for an hour and a half he lay there. And because he had just been coming home from a pastor's conference, his friend who was also a pastor was behind him in the line of traffic that had built up because of the accident on the bridge. And his friend – saw what was happening and recognized his friend's car.

He walked up to where the ambulance was and hearing what had happened he asked if he could climb into the ambulance and just sit with Don for a while. Being a pastor they gave him permission, "He's dead you know" they said. Don's friend nodded, and climbed into the ambulance where he began to pray and to sing . And the EMT's were like "whatever"...we've got other things to do. Well, Don was up in heaven at that moment and he writes that all his loved ones were gathered there. They were so happy to see him, and here's how he described it...and he shared this at the conference...

"I was standing in heaven. Joy pulsed through me as I looked around and at that moment I became aware of a large crowd of people. They stood in front of a brilliant

ornate gate...I didn't see Jesus but I did see people I had known. As they surged toward me, I knew instantly that all of them had died, during my lifetime. Their presence seemed absolutely natural. They rushed toward me, and every person was smiling, shouting and praising God... Never even in my most joyous moments on earth had I felt so fully alive..." (page 22)

Then he heard someone singing. It was his friend in the ambulance singing What A Friend We Have In Jesus. And that song seemed to call him back...Don came back to his body... and after 90 minutes of being dead, his body began to grow warm again. But every bone in his body was broken... and his recovery took over a year. But today he lives to tell this story. Scripture attests to this too. Jesus saw Moses and Elijah on the Mountain of Transfiguration, and they recognized each other and they spoke with one another, after they'd been long gone from this earth. The disciples on the Emmaus Road (Luke) recognize Jesus after they had been with him for awhile - even though he was in his resurrected form. And this tells me that the same will happen to us in heaven.

We are also told in scripture that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. All those who have gone before us

are cheering us on, watching us, assuring us as we approach the finish line that all will be well. Someone once said that...

"The church is the only society in the world that never loses any of its members to death. We just say 'see you later' but it is never a final goodbye."

I was particularly moved by a husband's summation of his wife's battle with cancer. She was a young mother of four, one just a baby. The day after her death, he posted this comment to Facebook:

"When people say she lost a battle with cancer I disagree..My wife didn't lose a battle with cancer, cancer lost the battle with my wife. When the body dies, cancer can't live anymore but my wife had the greatest victory of all and that's to walk with the lord...Cancer died; my wife lived."

Scripture says...

"Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25, NASB).

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

So we as the church, are in this thing together forever - we are a family in the truest sense for all eternity. We don't cease to exist...we just change locations. That is because we belong, not just to one another, but to Christ Himself who has given us eternal life. Look around you...these are your family for the

long haul – not just for this life but for the life to come. When someone in our congregation dies, or a loved one dies, their death is just a pause button for us on this side of things ... but its not the end of anything. We are going to be reunited soon

When death separates us, victory over death awaits us. We will see one another again.

Third, there's a new day coming when we find that...

III. **Heaven is more real than earth**

Ever notice how movies about Heaven always makes it look foggy, misty and sort of boring. In the clouds, dreamy, - you walk on these cumulous clouds and you sink halfway down (don't ask me why) and everything is white and colorless; not especially appealing to me...not as fun, not as colorful or as exciting as earth. But of course CS Lewis comes to the rescue here. It's actually the opposite. Heaven is not *less* real...its *more real* than earth.

In the final scene of the Chronicles of Narnia, Aslan comforts Peter, Edmund, and Lucy with these words:
"The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream has ended; this (heaven) is morning." (the dream was the earth)

Lewis then brings the story to a final conclusion:

"And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion (allusion to Jesus) ; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them...for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Friends, Jesus says to us **there's a new day coming. The real story is about to be written.**

Jesus says to us, "Could you just trust me on this one?" I've got your loved one in my hands. I've got this death issue taken care of. Let not your heart be troubled. You have so much to look forward to. The best is yet to come.

And for those of you who are skeptics, who see this hope of heaven as simply a crutch for the weak, or a child's fantasy to make us all feel better ...let me tell you...I am a pretty skeptical person too.

Stories of peoples near death experiences don't always convince me of much. I always think, well that's nice, but what if it is just a hallucination - a trick of the brain that makes this stuff happen right before someone expires. I think those thoughts too...but if you are like me, I'd strongly recommend

the book called **Proof of Heaven**. It was written by a guy named Eben Alexander who was a Harvard trained neurosurgeon. He had meningitis so badly that his brain was soaked in puss and his neo-cortex – the part of the brain that makes us human and creates hallucinations (that would happen let's say on an acid trip) was completely shut down at the time he had his experience of heaven. In addition to this, his recovery to full mental capacity after this, is nothing short of a medical miracle. I believe it was so that he could tell his story. He tries to explain it when he returns – as to what heaven is like - and he does a great job of it in the book– but he says trying to explain that other reality is like trying to explain anything on earth using half the alphabet. Read his book...I don't have the time to tell you it all here...but let me close with a few quotes from an article in Newsweek recently written by him to whet your appetite for more (**picture of Newsweek cover**)(**Picture of Eben Alexander**)“As a neurosurgeon, I did not believe in the phenomenon of near-death experiences. I grew up in a scientific world, the son of a neurosurgeon. I followed my father's path and became an

academic neurosurgeon, teaching at Harvard Medical School and other universities. I understand what happens to the brain when people are near death, and I had always believed there were good scientific explanations for the heavenly out-of-body journeys described by those who narrowly escaped death.

Although I considered myself a faithful Christian, I was so more in name than in actual belief. I didn't begrudge those who wanted to believe that Jesus was more than simply a good man who had suffered at the hands of the world. I sympathized deeply with those who wanted to believe that there was a God somewhere out there who loved us unconditionally. In fact, I envied such people the security that those beliefs no doubt provided.

But as a scientist, I simply knew better than to believe them myself. Very early one morning four years ago, I awoke with an extremely intense headache. Within hours, my entire cortex — the part of the brain that controls thought and emotion and that in essence makes us human — had shut down. Doctors at Lynchburg General Hospital in Virginia, a hospital where I myself worked as a neurosurgeon, determined that I had somehow contracted a very rare bacterial meningitis that mostly attacks newborns. E. coli bacteria had penetrated my cerebrospinal fluid and were eating my brain.

When I entered the emergency room that morning, my chances of survival in anything beyond a vegetative state were already low. They soon sank to near nonexistent. For seven days I lay in a deep coma, my body unresponsive, my higher-order brain functions totally offline.

Then, on the morning of my seventh day in the hospital, as my doctors weighed whether to discontinue treatment, my eyes popped open.

There is no scientific explanation for the fact that while my body lay in coma, my mind — my conscious, inner self — was

alive and well. While the neurons of my cortex were stunned to complete inactivity by the bacteria that had attacked them, my brain-free consciousness journeyed to another, larger dimension of the universe: a dimension I'd never dreamed existed and which the old, pre-coma me would have been more than happy to explain was a simple impossibility.

But that dimension, ...is there. It exists, and what I saw and learned there, has placed me quite literally in a new world: a world where we are much more than our brains and bodies, and where death is not the end of consciousness but rather a chapter in a vast, and incalculably positive, journey.

One of the few places I didn't have trouble getting my story across was a place I'd seen fairly little of before my experience: church. The first time I entered a church after my coma, I saw everything with fresh eyes. The colors of the stained-glass windows recalled the luminous beauty of the landscapes I'd seen in the world above. The deep bass notes of the organ reminded me of how thoughts and emotions in that world are like waves that move through you. And, most important, a painting of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples evoked the message that lay at the very heart of my journey: that we are loved unconditionally by a God even more grand and unfathomably glorious than the one I'd learned of as a child in Sunday school.

Friends...J

Trust in Jesus's promises to you. Trust in him for your loved ones that have gone before. There's a new day coming...a day with, no more crying, no more death, no more pain anymore. A day when all things will be made new.