

Easter 5A: John 14.1-14

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Did you know that some of the most committed believers in eternal life today are atheists? One of Elon Musk's lesser known projects is called Neuralink, which is part of a broader movement known as "transhumanism." Transhumanists like Musk are hard at work on what might be called a digital resurrection. They're developing technologies they believe will make it possible to upload our minds to supercomputers and live, in a very real sense, forever. Not in the clouds, but in *the Cloud*, as it were.

You don't have to have been a philosophy major to see that transhumanism raises some pretty gnarly existential questions. A central one is if everything my brain ever thought and felt and imagined were to be uploaded and if all that information behaved something like what we call consciousness, would it be me?

One of the most interesting writers I've found on all this is a former fundamentalist Christian named Meghan O'Gieblyn. She lost her belief in God a few years after graduating from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. But when Meghan lost her faith, it was a true loss, not a liberation. She didn't pretend that a universe without a god is one that suddenly makes sense and is free from the most troubling human questions and dilemmas. In fact, when she dove into transhumanism in search of fresh, godless answers to her old questions, she realized it had an eerily similar shape to the form of Christianity she had just left behind.

Transhumanism and what we might call apocalyptic Christianity both describe history as unfolding in phases or dispensations. They both see a culmination coming in a great apocalyptic event in which everything will be transformed and unified. But deeper down, Meghan O'Gieblyn realized that the transhumanists were working as hard as any anxious young Rapture-fearing Christian to somehow gain eternal life for their immortal souls.

I find this fascinating in part because the most popular book at the Christian camp where I worked in the summer of 1987 was "88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988." As far as I can tell, he didn't. Or at least not any more than he returned to be with us in 1987 or 1999 or in 2023.

What I'm struck with this morning is how different our gospel for today — which is one of the relatively few times Jesus actually talked about the life to come — what I'm struck with is how different this famous exchange is from everything I've just described, our sacred and our secular obsessions with everlasting life.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." That's not something Elon Musk said, I assure you. Probably ever. But it is what Jesus tells his friends in the 14th chapter of John. "Believe in God. Believe also in me," he says. It's fairly obvious that Jesus is not trying to convince his friends to believe in the existence of God or in the existence of Jesus himself. He meant "believe in" in the same way someone might believe in you. To believe in someone means to believe in who they are. It might mean that you have confidence that they can accomplish something. But mostly it means that you trust who they are more than that you trust anything in particular that they will do. Keep this in mind.

Because as Jesus begins to speak openly about the prospect of his death, he doesn't explain precisely how this or that prophecy or prediction will play out. Nor does he give his friends a lecture on the technical details of how life after death will work. All he really says is, "You can trust me. And as you expand your trust in me, you're expanding your trust in God."

You might have grown up with the image of many mansions in the King James Version of this story. Scholars tell us “dwelling places” is the better translation. Upgrading our eternal accommodations to mansions now strikes me as unfaithful to the story in a significant way. It’s not that mansions are big and fancy so much as that Jesus seems so intent on turning the disciples’ curiosity away from where he and they are ultimately going, and turning them toward the need for trust to get through the present circumstances of their lives. Call those dwelling places mansions and we start wondering what the chandeliers will look like and how many Teslas will be parked in our garage.

This is precisely the direction of the disciples’ questions. They think they need more information about the next life to be okay today. But Jesus says, “No you don’t. To be okay right now you have to entrust that future to God.” In fact, he’s so adamant about dismantling their line of questioning that when Thomas presses him to show them the way to the place where he’s going, Jesus says, “I’m the way. And I’m standing right here in front of you. Not only that, God is right in front of you right now in this conversation, not down at the other end of the road you’re trying to get GPS coordinates for.”

This is an illusion that still plagues us. We still believe that if we only knew exactly what the future held it would somehow solve everything. But that’s absurd. If a third-grade boy, full of worry and self-consciousness as he scans the cafeteria of his new school for a seat somehow knew that at thirty-five he’d have a stable job in Millington and a family of four, would the anxiety of that moment evaporate? Of course it wouldn’t. Having detailed information about the future has very little to do with the ordinary challenges of life with other people today. That boy needs to feel held by a love he can trust right then.

And so it is for us. Learning to let go and trust God with the details of the future can be a way of opening our eyes and our trust to the presence of God in the moment at hand. It truly can be a way, a truth, and a life for us right now. And this way is not just any way. It is the way of Jesus. The way of love. Maybe trust is just the space we need to meet this world with the kind of love Jesus taught and lived to the end.

Lately I’ve been following the musings of an Australian-born musician named Nick Cave. A few years ago, Suzanne Henley turned me on to a newsletter he writes called the Red Hand Files. Mr. Cave began writing it after the tragic death of his teenaged son Arthur who fell from a cliff during an experience with LSD. The premise for the Files was simply this: “You can ask me anything. There will be no moderator. Let’s see what happens. Much love, Nick.”

The premise was a simple, radical trust of strangers and of their questions. I don’t recommend this approach to grief without lots of caveats and caution. But Nick Cave says the Red Hand Files played a part in a healing he didn’t believe possible after a loss he didn’t think he could survive. He came to feel “... a kind of deep inclusion in the human predicament,” he would write, “and an understanding of our vulnerability and the sense that as individuals, we are, each of us, imperiled.”

Nick Cave does read the Bible and go to church now, which his most ardent fans probably find stranger than anything this strange artist ever did onstage. He also speaks freely of Arthur’s continuing presence in his life, even if he’s wary of overstating what it means to say he believes his son somehow lives on. But what I find most aligned in Nick Cave’s story with the way Jesus spoke of in John is not his openness to belief in God or to the possibility of life after death. What looks like the way of Jesus to me is how in trusting his grief and the future to God, he opened up to the lives of other humans struggling with their own doubts, fears, and wounds in this life. Right now.

I'll leave you with Red Hand File #220. See if it suggests the way a kind of trust, even when life stops making sense, really can make room in us in which love can begin to grow. The question comes from a reader who seemed to prefer the younger, edgier Nick Cave.

“When did you become a Hallmark card hippie? Joy, love, peace. Puke! Where’s the rage, anger, hatred? Reading these lately is like listening to an old preacher drone on and on at Sunday mass.” - Ermine, Grand Marais, MI, USA

Here’s Nick’s reply:

Dear Ermine,

Things changed after my first son died. *I* changed. For better or for worse, the rage you speak of lost its allure and, yes, perhaps I became a Hallmark card hippie. Hatred stopped being interesting. Those feelings were like old dead skins that I shed...

When my son died, I was faced with an *actual* devastation, and with no real effort of my own that posture of disgust toward the world began to wobble and collapse underneath me. I started to understand the precarious and vulnerable position of the world. I started to fret for it. Worry about it. I felt a sudden, urgent need to, at the very least, extend a hand in some way to assist it – this terrible, beautiful world – instead of ... sitting in judgement of it.

Perhaps, Ermine, you are right, and I did, for good or ill, turn ... into a walking Hallmark card. But, well, here we are, you and me, sending smoke signals to each other across a yawning ideological divide. Hello Ermine, I drone, hello.

Love, Nick

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus tells us. “Believe in God. Believe also in me,” he pleads. “The way, the truth, the life you seek is right here, saying hello to you right now.” Which I believe is to say we can trust the God who has given us these beautiful, imperiled lives in the present to hold us lovingly in whatever is to come, in this life and the next. What we need then is not more information about that future, whether from experts in prophecies or supercomputing or anything else. What Jesus says we need is to entrust our futures a little more fully to God, in order to make a little more room in our lives to love one another today.