

“Saving Paradise”

I'm not sure how Saint Peter would feel about having a small river in Arizona named after him. San Pedro, after all, is traditionally the keeper of the keys, the guardian of the Pearly Gates, and the subject of a hundred jokes about who's going to heaven, like the one about the three stupid guys who die and find themselves at the entrance of Paradise. Saint Peter tells them that they can enter in if they can answer one simple question. He asks the first man, "WHAT IS EASTER?"

The man replies, "Oh, that's easy, it's the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and are thankful."

"WRONG," replies Peter, and proceeds to ask the second man the same question, "WHAT IS EASTER?"

The second man replies, "Oh, Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, sing carols and exchange presents."

Saint Peter looks at that man, shakes his head in disgust, looks at the third man and asks, "WHAT IS EASTER?"

The third man smiles and looks the saint in the eye. "I know what Easter is. Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and were later deceived and turned over to the Romans. The Romans took Jesus to be crucified. He was buried in a nearby cave, sealed by a boulder. And every year the boulder is rolled away so that Jesus can come out, and if he sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter."

Incorrect. We know that's the wrong answer, of course. But what exactly is the right answer? To be serious, what did early Christians intend when they celebrated Easter? What did they mean when they spoke of Paradise or the kingdom of heaven? How did the understanding of resurrection or salvation change over the centuries, and where do we find a hope today that enables us to live with faith and confidence in this world?

To answer those questions, let's step back to consider Peter for a moment. Although Saint Peter is usually associated harps and halos and angels living in a land of fleecy clouds, that's a caricature, a distortion, of how he and the other disciples must have understood their rabbi's teachings about heaven and hell. Jesus and his followers were descendants of a desert dwelling people, after all, a notoriously practical race. To persist as a religious minority for thousands of years, living through persecutions in a harsh environment, they had to be down-to-earth. You can't have your head in the clouds in those circumstances, not even very billowy ones. So when the authors of the Hebrew scriptures alluded to paradise, they almost always mentioned water.

Remember your Bible stories from Sunday School? Moses strikes a rock and a gushing brook springs forth. Isaiah foretells a restoration of righteousness when justice will roll

down like waters and parched lands bloom again. The Psalmist cries, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you.” For people accustomed to a dry climate, water was no mere metaphor, but the very key to survival. So when he meets a Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus tells her that “those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

When a fellow Jew talked like that, about eternal life, his listeners were inevitably reminded of Eden, that earthly garden whose very name means “delight.” Paradise, as first envisioned, was a botanical wonderland, as the Good Book tells us, containing every kind of herb and tree pleasant to the sight and good for food, with a mist rising continually and moistening the ground. And out of that lush greenhouse rivers flowed, not just mythological streams, but the Tigris and Euphrates, which together framed a Fertile Crescent that archaeologists tell us really was the bread basket of the ancient Near East. As Evan Eisenberg describes the region in his book *The Ecology of Eden*,

Although there were still marshes in the south, and plenty of semidesert in which seminomads as well as villagers and cityfolk grazed their herds, a wide tract of land on either side of the Euphrates was generously spangled with grainfields, date plantations, fishponds, and gardens of lettuce, onions, lentils, garlic and cress.

Those memories and images of a rich earthly paradise continued to spark the Christian imagination. So when they pictured a life eternal, they naturally thought of a life abundant, verdant and green. Visit the catacombs, the crypts beneath Rome dating from the 2nd and 3rd centuries, for example, and you’ll find no depictions of last judgments or hell or winnowing the saved from the damned. Instead you’ll see scenes of shepherds and meadows with flowers, trees filled with birds, images of fish and dolphins frolicking. Scenes of Jesus’ birth are there, too, and vignettes from his life, healing the sick and feeding the hungry; he’s often pictured as a youth, beardless with flowing hair, strong and tender, sometimes milking a sheep or carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Noticeably absent are any images of the crucifixion. No tortured bodies, no scourged flesh, no crown of thorns, no sacrificial victim rendered up in agony for the expiation of our sins.

You don’t find any of that in Christian art for a thousand years, in fact. As Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker observe in their book *Saving Paradise*, “it took Jesus a long time to die.” Visiting the churches and basilicas of the primitive Christian era, they discovered that the “early Christian paradise was something other than ‘heaven’ or the afterlife.”

Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on the earth. Images of it in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and the teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within. Sparkling

mosaics in vivid colors captured the world's luminosity.

Read the gospels, and you'll find that Christ's teachings focused on the here-and-now at least as much as on the hereafter. When he spoke of the kingdom of heaven, he wasn't talking so much about a celestial life-to-come as about this world transfigured and transformed. Relationships ruled by compassion rather than by force .. structures of authority dismantled that separated people into pure and impure, the powerful and the powerless ... the downtrodden lifted up ... the naked clothed, blessings upon the disenfranchised and dispossessed. "Thy will be done on earth," he prayed, for he was at least as concerned with getting heaven into people as with getting people into heaven.

And that's my attitude also. I'd like to believe there's immortality waiting for us. And I certainly don't discount that possibility, for there are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in our philosophy. Last month, for example, I was invited to attend a conference sponsored by the Edgar Cayce Foundation in Virginia Beach. Edgar Cayce, you may know, was a psychic and medium famous in the early part of the 20th century for channeling messages from "the other side." His organization, the Association for Research and Enlightenment, asked me down to talk on *The Souls of Animals* and on healing from the loss of a pet. I'd warned the conference people in advance that I didn't necessarily buy into past lives or reincarnation or whatever it was they actually happened to believe. Yet they graciously acknowledged that opinions differed on these matters, demonstrating an open-mindedness that enticed me to go in the same non-dogmatic spirit, to speak and at the same time listen to what the other presenters had to say. The headliner at the conference was a guy named John Holland, who I found witty, charming, articulate, self-effacing and quite fascinating. I don't think he was a fraud, yet he seemed to know things about various people in the audience that no one could guess or know except through some unexplained powers. I have no explanation for it, at any rate. Perhaps he really was receiving messages from the dead—who are not dead, but still able to communicate with the living.

And I'll mention too that the week after I returned from the conference, my wife had a dream. All of our pets—Holly's rats, Sandy the guinea pig who died last January when the ground was undiggable and who's still in our freezer waiting to be buried, Dori's old cat James—all were sleeping serenely, snuggling and nestling with one another, alive and at peace. I pay attention to dreams like that. The unconscious can tap into a wisdom that our rational minds can't always fathom.

And yet I don't have to believe any of that. For while I take dreams seriously, I certainly don't want to live in a land of dreams. And I don't intend to spend much time learning how to communicate with the dead when I'm still trying to master the art of communicating with the living. Asked if he were ready for the next world, Thoreau famously replied "One world at a time." So it's not necessary to believe there's a more beautiful world waiting for us. What's important is to sense the beauty in this one. It's not necessary to suppose that Saint Peter is going to welcome us when we cross that river Jordan. What's essential is to see the San Pedro that's right in front of our eyes.

In the heat of late April [writes Kingsolver] the modest saint invites us down from the blazing desert into a willowy tunnel of cool shade, birdsong and the velvet-brown scent of riverbank. We take unhurried bikes there whenever we can, reading the dappled script of animal tracks and the driftwood history of flood and drought embedded in the steep banks. The sight of a vermilion flycatcher leaves us breathless every time—he's not just a bird, he's a punctuation mark on the air, printed in red ink, read out loud as a gasp. The kids dance barefoot between sandbars, believing they have found the Secret Garden.

And they have. The Secret Garden, the hidden Paradise, the longed for heaven, the impossible resurrection, are here and now. Not in some other moment, but in this moment. Not in some other world, but in this world, transformed through the power of love, through the consciousness of our connection to the stream of life and to each other. Not to be found in some realm of changeless perfection, but through plunging joyfully, reverently, into the river of time