

People have almost universally believed that death is not final, that some form of immortality exists. The pyramids are an easy example, the tombs of the Emperors in Xian, China, and the burial mounds of many Native American communities. Most people believe that those who have died still exist in some state, in some modality, in some place, in some heaven or hell, however that might be conceived. For some, immortality is seen as a state where in a person is still conscious and relational; while for others, existence after death is understood as real but impersonal, like a drop of water that has flowed back into the oceans.

As Catholic Christians, this is OUR belief: We believe that the dead are still alive, still themselves, and, very importantly, still in a living, conscious, and loving relationship with us and with each other. That's our common concept of heaven and, however simplistic its popular expression at times, it is wonderfully correct. That's exactly what our dogma, not to mention deep intuitive experience, invites us to. After death we live on, conscious, self-conscious, in communication with others who have died before us, in communion with those we left behind on earth, and in communion with the divine itself. That's our doctrine of THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS.

But how do we understand this? Not least, how do we connect to our loved ones after they have died? Three interpenetrating biblical images can help serve as an entry-point for our understanding. All three come from the Gospels, one from the gospel we just heard.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that at the moment of Jesus' death, *the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.* (Matthew 27:50-52). The Gospels then go on to tell us that on the morning of the Resurrection several women came to Jesus' grave to anoint His dead body with embalming spices, but rather than finding His dead body, they meet instead an empty grave and 2 angels who challenge them with words to this effect: *Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here. He's alive and you can find Him in Galilee.* (Lk 24:5). We also recall John's account of the disciples encountering Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where He serves the astounded disciples their breakfast. (Jn 21) What's contained in these images?

As Christians, we believe that we are given eternal life through Jesus' death. Among other images, the Gospels express that in this metaphor: Jesus' death, they tell us, "Opened the tombs" and emptied graveyards. For this reason, Christians have never had a huge cult around cemeteries. As Christians, we don't do much in the way of spiritual practices around our cemeteries. Why? Because we believe all those graves are empty. Our loved ones aren't there and aren't to be found there. They're with Jesus, in 'Galilee.' To go to a cemetery or a columbarium may help us to recall them, and feel their presence, but we believe that they are with Jesus, in Galilee.

What's 'Galilee,' in terms of a biblical image? In the Gospels, Galilee is more than a place on a map; it's also a place inside the Spirit, God's Spirit and our own. In the Gospels, Galilee is the place where, for the most part, the good things happen. It's the place where the disciples first meet Jesus, where they fall in love with Him, where they commit themselves to follow Him, and where miracles happen. Galilee is the place where Jesus invites us to walk on water. Galilee is the place where the disciples' souls enlarge and thrive.

And that is also a place for each of our deceased loved ones. In each of their lives, there was a Galilee, a place where their persons and souls were most alive, where their lives radiated the energy and exuberance of the divine. When we look at the life a loved one who has died, we need to ask: Where were they most

alive? What qualities did they, most-uniquely, embody and bring into a room? Where did they lift my spirit and make me want to be a better person? For some, it's in a garden, others the kitchen, still others their workbench, yard, the ocean or mountains, with a math problem to be solved, a paint brush in hand, an instrument to play or a song to sing, a helping hand to a needy person or a visit to a prisoner, a rosary in hand or a scripture sitting in one's lap. The possibilities for Galilee are endless. But they are places where we easily and naturally understand that we have touched something deep – the presence of God Himself.

When we name these things, we will have named our loved one's Galilee – and we will also have named the Galilee of the Gospels, namely, that place in the heart where Jesus invites us to meet Him. And that too is where we will meet our loved ones in the communion of saints. Don't look for a live person in a cemetery. They're not there. They're in Galilee. Meet them there.

Elizabeth Johnson, leaning on Karl Rahner, adds this thought: "Hoping against hope, we affirm that our loved ones who have died have fallen not into nothingness but into the embrace of the living God. And that is where we can find them again; when we open our hearts to the silent calmness of God's own life in which we dwell, not by selfishly calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the depth of our own hearts where God also abides."

And the 'Galilee' of our loved ones can also be found inside our own 'Galilee.' There's a deep place inside the heart, inside faith, hope and love, where everyone, living or deceased is met. Amen. (adapted from Ronal Rolheiser, posting of 2 November 2015)