

CONSCIOUSNESS



Mark 16:5 "As (the women) entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were afraid. But he said to them, 'Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. (So) go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So, (the women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Last summer in Honolulu, a body of lawyers known as the Uniform Law Commission tried to agree on a new legal definition of death. Appointed by the U.S. states and territories to

recommend model legislation for adoption nationwide, the commission members were tasked with revising the standard of brain death that has been widely used in the United States for the last forty years. The last effort to define death in the United States was in 1980, and at that time, there was remarkable consensus on a decision that became so consequential, one that lead to a dramatic increase in viable organ donations, saving the lives of millions. Back then, the commission proposed a new Uniform Determination of Death Act establishing that in addition to the traditional definition of death by the heart ceasing to beat, a person is also now thought dead when their brain has ceased to function. All 50 states and D.C. adopted the act's central proposition – which is staggering, really, if you think about it, given today's ongoing battles over questions and disputes about when life begins. Last summer, however, the Commission couldn't come to an agreement. They couldn't reach a new consensus. They ended up disbanding.

The problem now is consciousness, is understanding when consciousness ceases, if it ceases at all. Last September, a medical study was published by a team of American scientists and doctors that saw researchers observe CPR procedures in more than 500 patients across 25 hospitals around the world between 2017 and 2020. Although doctors have long thought that the brain suffers permanent damage about 10 minutes after the heart stops

beating and stops supplying the brain with oxygen, this new study found that the brain can show signs of electrical recovery long after that. Using EEG readings, they observed periods of heightened consciousness in dozens and dozens of patients --- the flatlined brains of some cardiac arrest patients suddenly burst into a flurry of activity during CPR, even though their heart stopped beating up to an hour before. And more astonishingly, many of these legally dead patients appear to have maintained consciousness during that time even though the heart and brain had ceased functioning. In 1998, the neuroscientist Christof Koch had bet the empirical philosopher David Chalmers that within 25 years, science would be able identify what part of the brain is responsible for consciousness. Last year, Christof acknowledged failure and paid off his bet, with some scientists acknowledging that consciousness may not be independent on the brain at all!

Such "recalled experiences of death" - a term the scientists now prefer over "near-death experiences" for accuracy's sake, have been reported across diverse cultures throughout recorded history. Some Western scientists previously dismissed such stories as hallucinations or dreams, but recently a few research teams have begun to pay more serious attention to the phenomena, as a means to investigate consciousness and to shine light on the mysteries of death. So of the 567 total

patients in this study, only 53 survived and were successfully resuscitated, though about half of them reported that they had retained consciousness after their legal deaths and had encounters like 'near death experiences' that have been widely recorded before. One of the participants in the study, for example, spoke of a "being of light" standing near them, "looming over me like a great tower of strength". While the being radiated "warmth and love", the patient said it displayed glimpses of their life from the viewpoint of those around them. "I was shown the consequences of my life, thousands of people that I'd interacted with and felt what they felt about me, saw their life and how I had impacted them." Many in the latter group described the event as a "moral evaluation" of "their entire life and how they've conducted themselves." One patient recalled seeing their father, while another heard their grandmother's voice telling them, 'you need to go back,' the study revealed. One could see themselves standing next to their own lifeless body in a hospital bed. Another reported being surrounded by darkness but could feel someone holding their hand. According to one survivor: "I was no longer in my body. I floated without weight or physicality. I was above my body and directly below the ceiling of the intensive therapy room. I observed the scene that was taking place below me . . . I, who no longer was the body that had belonged to me just a moment prior, found myself in a position which was . . . more

elevated. It was a place that had nothing to do with any kind of . . . material experience." Another patient mentioned entering a tunnel while feeling "intense peace" that was "so calm and serene with an incredible amount of tranquility". One patient who emerged from a coma claimed to have been able to hear their partner and son talking to them while they were seemingly unconscious, and while there was no recorded brain activity. A nurse, on her first day back at work after vacation, was a member of the medical team that successfully resuscitated a female patient whom she did not know, but the very next day she saw the patient, who responded, "Oh, you're the one with the plaid shoelaces!" and explained that she observed them while watching the resuscitation from overhead. A young nine-year-old boy named Eddie was seriously ill in a hospital and told those in his hospital room that he had been to heaven, recounting seeing his grandfather, an aunt, and an uncle there. But then he startled and agitated his father when Eddie reported that his nineteen-year-old sister Teresa, away at college, was in heaven too, and she told Eddie that he had to return. But the father had just spoken to Teresa two days prior. Checking with the college, the father found out that his daughter had been killed in a car accident the previous day and the college had been unable to reach Teresa's parents, probably because they were with Eddie at the hospital.

So, what are we as Christians to make of all of this? To start with: let us acknowledge that from time immemorial, there have been stories, now and then, of a person who apparently died, saw an unseen world, and came back to talk about it. Carol Zaleski wrote a valuable book entitled *Otherworld Journeys* (Oxford University Press, 1987), collecting such stories from many different cultures and over many different centuries. Thus, the story of Jesus' resurrection is perhaps just another in a long series of life after death experiences. For our consciousness seems to survive our deaths! This is what neuroscientists are saying now, not just theologians, but neuroscientists.

There can be little doubt that Jesus really died. The Romans were very good at putting people to death, and the story of the breaking the legs of the thieves and piercing Jesus' side with a lance would seem to confirm his demise. And yet we have this whole mysterious series of Resurrection appearances for several weeks thereafter from a variety of sources that haunt us still.

This does not appear to be some great religious conspiracy as some sceptics suggest, for Jesus' disciples themselves seem totally unprepared for this event and unbelieving of it as it unfolded before them. His apostles weren't looking for the resurrection; they were hiding behind closed doors in fear of

the Jewish authorities. What happened that first Easter morning so long ago was completely unexpected, as women came to the tomb to finish the burial preparations that had been hurried on Friday night before the Sabbath, and then they ran off afraid, not saying anything to anyone at first. Each of Jesus' disciples who saw the Empty Tomb, thought first that the grave had been robbed, and not that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Thus, Jesus' appearances were an epiphany of life after death. It was a mystery, and the disciples telling of those stories are themselves evidence of the unexpectedness of Jesus' resurrection, and of its truth, as the Gospel accounts disagree with one another in detailing the Resurrection, time after time after time. They are like witnesses to a car crash disagreeing with one another about the details, but no one disagrees that there was a car crash.

Thus, there is some confusion in the retelling of this story, except for one fact, one remarkable fact, namely, that God raised Jesus from the dead, in some fashion or another, and that there is therefore, life after life, eternal life as the Church calls it. Those early Christians, just like Christians today, will often disagree amongst themselves about the facts of what happened and will often disagree amongst themselves about what it all means. But because of the stories of those early disciples, and others like them, we all can remain united as

Christians on this day in asserting our faith in God's mysterious power, and in affirming that there is indeed life after death, and that by following the way of Jesus, we can partake of that eternal life, as we all proclaim boldly today in faith: Alleluia. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed.

AMEN.