

## A CHILD'S NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE



Luke 24:10 "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told (the message of the angels) to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

In 2010, I first read the story of a young boy who he was only 3 years old at the time struggling for his life in a near-death experience during emergency surgery at a local hospital. His name was Colton, and he and his family were planning a road trip. The day before, however, Colton complained that his stomach hurt and stayed home from school that day while his favorite aunt watched him. By midday, she was calling his mother to say that his condition had worsened, that he had a fever with

chills, and had spent most of the day motionless on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. His aunt and uncle decided Colton was sick enough to head off to the emergency room. But the doctor at the hospital there said that there was stomach flu working its way through the school, and he sent Colton home, where during the night his fever did break. He seemed fine the next day, so, off the family went on their planned vacation. Later that night Colton said he thought he was going to throw up, and since he had no fever, his parents thought it might have been something he ate. Thereafter Colton started throwing up every 30 minutes like clockwork, and his sister also threw up a couple of times, perhaps sympathetically. For she was better the next day, but Colton had abdominal pain, profuse vomiting, a fever that had come and gone, so his parents wondered whether it might be appendicitis. They made an appointment with the doctor at the small local hospital where he had been seen before the trip, and they headed back home. His white blood cell count suggested it wasn't appendicitis, they were told there, but the chest x-rays showed several unidentifiable masses in his abdomen. The blood test results were inconclusive. He was put on IVs to prevent dehydration, but he was slowly slipping away before their very eyes. The parents in a panic decided to transfer him to the larger regional medical center, where they did a CT scan, which revealed that Colton had a ruptured appendix from days before.

Colton suddenly needed emergency surgery at once if they were to save his life, and it was a harrowing few hours for his parents, who were questioning their handling of this situation, as well as that of the small local hospital, all the while not knowing now whether Colton would survive or not, but in the end, thank God, he did.

A few months later, Colton, now four years old, began to make odd statements about what he experienced during his surgery. As they passed the hospital in the car one day, his mother asked whether he remembered the place. Colton replied "Yes, Mommy, I remember. That's where the angels sang to me!" Angels, his parents thought. What did the angels look like, his parents cautiously replied. "Well, one of them looked like Grandpa Dennis, but it wasn't him, 'cause Grandpa Dennis has glasses." Apparently, angels don't wear glasses!

Colton continued by explaining, "Dad, Jesus had the angels sing to me because I was so scared." "Well, where was Jesus?" they asked, "I was sitting in Jesus' lap," Colton replied. This was shocking coming from the mouth of a young four-year-old. His parents wondered whether it was a dream, and so they asked "Colton, where were you when you saw Jesus?" Colton then described a typical out-of-body occurrence like those adults who have had near death experiences, replying that he was looking down from the ceiling onto the doctors working on him during his

surgery, and that he had nearly died there, and then also that he saw his mother crying on the pay telephone in another room in the hospital and also saw his father on his knees praying alone in an empty chapel there at the hospital. His father, however, had never told anyone, including his wife, about the angry private conversation he had on his knees with God that day about his son's survival, and he was shocked when Colton revealed knowing about it. Little by little, nonchalantly, over the next few months, Colton revealed other details, as best he could, often he didn't have the vocabulary to describe what he saw. For example, Colton said that Jesus had "markers" on his hands and feet, because he didn't know the word 'scars' yet.

Sometime later Colton also announced that he met his great grandfather in heaven, who had died 30 years before Colton was even born. Colton, however, didn't recognize a photograph of his great grandfather when he was an old man that his father showed him, but then later he did surprisingly pick him out in a group photo that his grandmother had, when his great grandfather was only about 29. Apparently thank God, we don't look old in heaven!

The most amazing part of the story for me, however, was when Colton began crying one night with a babysitter, saying that he missed his sister. Okay, the babysitter said, "You want to go downstairs and see her?" "No, I miss my other sister," he

replied. "I have another sister. I saw her in heaven," and then he began to cry until he fell asleep. This was all very disconcerting to the babysitter, who didn't know anything about Colton's experiences during his surgery. And Colton's parents were, upon return, stunned as well, because they had never told their young son about a miscarriage they had before Colton was born, because after all, that's more than a three-year-old needs to know. But Colton went on to tell his mom later "in heaven, this little girl ran up to me, and she wouldn't stop hugging me," in a boyish tone that clearly indicated that he didn't enjoy all that hugging from a girl, who looked like his other sister, he said, but was a bit smaller and with dark hair. His mother then asked Colton cautiously what her name was. He said that she said that you never gave her one, which was true, and startled his mother. And yet despite all of this, in the end, Colton has now grown up, by all appearances, into a perfectly normal American teenager, leaving unexplained his experiences.

The question of what happens to us after we die has haunted humankind for as long as we have records. It haunts us still, as we all inevitably lose family members and friends, or as we simply get older ourselves. Is this all there is to life? These are eternal questions, and I have a hard time simply dismissing the words of a four-year-old like Colton about his experience,

just as I have a hard time accepting a blanket dismissal by my skeptical friends of any such talk of an afterlife.

More than forty years ago when I was in college, I read a book entitled "*Life After Life*" by Dr. Raymond Moody, who is the scholar who coined the phrase "near death experience" from his studies. His book was a scientific record from a doctor who interviewed 150 people who had medically died upon the surgery table and then were later brought back to life. Dr. Moody noted a common pattern of experiences among them, despite numerous variations in their stories, and he went on to write nine more books on the subject. Numerous other books soon appeared telling similar stories. Nonetheless Dr. Moody was quick to point out that life after death is not something that he could prove scientifically. For all the people he interviewed had ultimately survived, like Colton, and thus in some sense didn't really die. Their common experiences may result from nothing more than the brain cooling down in death, he suggests. Thus, belief in life after death is still a matter of faith, Dr. Moody concluded.

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.

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. Thus, the story of Jesus' resurrection is perhaps just another in a long series of life after death experiences.

Jesus' story of resurrection, if we can believe it, is perhaps a more definitive account of life after death than Dr. Moody's subjects because there can be little doubt that Jesus really died and was buried. Still there is much confusion in the Gospels in the telling of this story, except for one fact, one undeniable fact, namely, that God did something very powerful and very unexpected that first Easter morning, 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, sadly just like Christians today, will often dispute with each other about the facts and will often disagree with each other about what it all means, just as many of the stories from Dr. Moody's patients disagreed about the details of what happened to them after they died. But because of the stories of those early disciples, and others I

think, like Colton, we all can remain, I believe, firmly united in asserting our faith in God's mysterious power, and asserting that there is indeed life after death, and that by following the way of Jesus, we can partake of that eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, as we proclaim boldly in faith today: Alleluia.

Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. AMEN.