

The Door Is Always Open

*He touched me with his right hand and said, "Do not be afraid.
I am the first and the last, the one who lives.
Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever.
I hold the keys to death and the netherworld." – Revelation 1:17-18*

Several years ago, one of our Catholic hospitals was going through a routine safety check with the fire department when those at the front desk were asked to produce the key to the main hospital entrance should there be an emergency and the door need to be locked. A ripple went through the administration. No one knew where such a key might be. Long-time staff were consulted. Retirees from decades past were called at home. Turns out that no one could remember its doors ever being locked. The entrance to the hospital had been open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, quite possibly since its founding almost 150 years ago.

In the book of Revelation from which we read each Easter season, John of Patmos envisions the Risen Jesus speaking to him of another door that has been unlocked never to be closed again: the door to eternal life.

Death has always been a part of existence. And it has been argued that religion itself emerged historically to help us wrestle with that reality: How can we best make peace with the knowledge that we will die? Is death an end or does life continue on the other side of death? If life continues, in what way? Do we live on through our descendants? Do we maintain our own individual identities? Where will we "go" after death? Is there some sort of final justice in which we will be held accountable for the way we lived?

At John's time, it was often imagined that the dead were entirely cut off from the living. If they continued to exist at all, it was only in a gray netherworld where they were but shadows of their previous selves. He understood Jesus as opening the door that separated the dead from the living, including the Living God. Relationships that had been severed were now reconnected and would forever remain so.

Our work in Catholic health care regularly puts us in contact with those who stand at death's door—the seriously ill, the aged, those who've suffered accidents. Those we serve are often naturally fearful of what lies on the other side. Death remains the greatest mystery each of us will ever have to face and, for those on its doorstep, the questions death raises are especially urgent.

As caregivers, we can't pretend that we have all the answers. But we know that our hospitals and nursing care facilities were founded on the conviction that death is not

something that we need to fear. Our institutions share John of Patmos' vision that the connections we share with family and friends will not be severed by death. We will not become mere shadows of our former selves. Rather, like the unlocked doors of our facilities, death is an entryway to the promise of healing and greater life.

This week, let us join in the Easter journey with John of Patmos, pausing to remember the names and faces of those we have served and loved who have crossed the doorway of death. Let us call to mind especially those who have died during the past two years of the pandemic. Let us entrust them into the care of God knowing that their death was not an end, but an entry to continued healing and life. And let us savor our sense of ongoing connection to all who have passed on, hearing Jesus' voice say again, "Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever."