

“The New Jersey Resurrection”
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Good news, friends,
good news:
it turns out we are not alone.

There is a distant planet
in a star system the Hubble telescope does not see,
perhaps is not even capable of seeing,
and on this planet there lives a species of –
well, for lack of a better word
let us call them people.
And these people on this far-away world
are very much like us,
in many respects:
they live, they love, they try, they laugh, they mourn, they die.
While the details of their lives would be fascinating to recount,
all I’m able to share with you today is
an unusual quirk in the religious belief of many of these people:

It turns out this far flung people on a distant galaxy
actually believe, despite any evidence,
that when they are dead
they will experience an afterlife
in a place they know

as New Jersey.

Not just any New Jersey, but this New Jersey,
here in the United States of America,
here on the planet we call earth, in the milky way galaxy.

They are convinced that upon dying they will wake up
and next thing they know,
they will be transported to the Garden State,
and they will live their future lives
here in the land of Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi,
here in the shadow of I-78 and the Turpike and
the Parkway, here in the suburbs of New York City
and Philadelphia,
here in the farmlands of the Western counties,
or on the Jersey shore.

They are convinced that after their mortal life is over,
New Jersey will be their destination
As ridiculous as this sounds,
what's even more ridiculous is that they
believe *this*
to be
heaven.

Through circumstances that I'm not at liberty to discuss with you,
I've had conversations with a few of these people,
and I've told them that I think they're crazy.

"It's none of my business, my alien friends," I tell them,

“Except I’m in New Jersey just about every day.
And even supposing heaven exists,
even making the grand and farfetched supposition
that our bodies rot but our souls do not,
is New Jersey really the *best* heaven you can come up with?”

Yes, they tell me, if all goes well we will make it to New Jersey
if we are lucky.

They are excited to meet a traveler from this legendary land.
Is it true, they ask, that you can get a hummus on pita bread,
and wash it down with orange juice or
pineapple juice or guava juice,
or with a glass of diet soda, whatever you want?
Well, yes, I tell them,
you can certainly do that.

Is it true you can walk in a field in the morning,
sit in the sunshine beneath a tree,
and then in the afternoon you can go to the library,
and you can read books that have been written last year
or thousands of years ago?
Sure, I say. I myself have had days like that.

They look at me in awe. Heaven! they cry! Hallelujah!
The garden state exists, it is real, it is waiting for us!
These people, my alien friends,
are dancing at the mere mention of New Jersey.

To have met a person who knows about
this heavenly place to them
is confirmation that the promised land is real.

Is it true, they ask, is it true that you can ride on a train
or a bus, while seeing streets and trees and women and men
out the window,
and then be transported to the land of skyscrapers?
Sure, I tell them. Some people do it every day.
They're called commuters.
Commuters! they say, and from their lips the
word has a certain romance to it I've never
heard before. Just think,
every day to live amongst the skyscrapers,
and then every evening to return to the Garden State!

Is it true, they ask, is it true
that the people in the Garden States are different heights
and different sizes and different ages and different color skin and
different backgrounds and different religious beliefs
and different political beliefs and different languages and different
sexualities and
different abilities and different talents and different personalities,
and not only are they not at war with each other,
they all can appreciate a
really good tune on the radio?

Well, I guess so, I say,
we New Jerseyites actually disagree about songs, too, but
lots of people like the same songs,
and lots of songs are liked by lots
of different people. Heck, in our Unitarian
Universalist congregations we sing songs
together. I don't always like every song,
but if I can't sing it for myself,
I sing it for someone else. AND we have Bruce
Springsteen.

The more I say the more exuberant my alien friends
are getting. Hallelujah! Hallelujah, New Jersey
is real.

Oh, to sing in New Jersey, to wake up singing in New Jersey! What
could possibly be better? What could
possibly be better than New Jersey.

I don't really know the answer to that one.
I tell them about the heavenly
notions common to *our* society:
you know, clouds, harps, angels, gates.
They burst out laughing. *That's* your heaven?
Well, I say, sort of.
Harps and clouds and wings?
Yeah, I guess.
Don't you already have harps in New Jersey?
Well, yeah, one or two.

And don't you *fly* across the world, above the clouds in gigantic airplanes?

Well, yeah, sometimes.

They look at me, funny.

Not much of a heaven, is it?

Well, they've got me on that one.

But New Jersey? Really?

Couldn't you guys have picked Tahiti, Bermuda, or Katmandu?

I'll tell you about heaven, I say.

If I had all the money in the world,

if I didn't have to work for a living,

if nothing ever went wrong,

I would sit on a beach in Tahiti,

Watching the ocean while sipping
on a blue drink with a frilly umbrella.

Sunshine, sand empty "to do" box,

the world as my oyster,

what a paradise

Now my friends, New Jersey's OK,

I'll grant you that.

But wouldn't *this* be heaven on earth?

They think about this.

We have a different word for that, they say.

"Vacation".

We have places like that here on our planet. Sure, it's very pleasant.

But we want heaven ever after, not a pleasant afternoon. What fun is it to have no challenges, no roadblocks, no accomplishments, no twists and turns of life. How sublime can it get,

to never have cause to shed a tear? To never feel a love so deep it brings us out of our own comfort?

To never love a person so dearly that even after they leave the earth,

our hearts still ache for their presence?

We are looking for heaven, and for us heaven means a place where life, real life, happens.

You want real life? I say

Well, you'll get it, but I'm not sure you'll like what you find.

Things are not so great here.

I know a woman in New Jersey who works as a janitor, every day she makes old floors look like brand new, every day her toil is the same.

This woman comes from Guatemala. She has a family in Guatemala, but

after getting to know her I have learned she hasn't seen her children,

the people loves most in the whole world, loves more than her own self,

in eight years.

She's afraid that if she goes to see them, she will not be able to return to the United States.

And if she can't return she may not have a way to feed her family. Because she loves them, she is here, and they are two thousand miles away.

I have seen this woman clean the same building day after day without a sigh or complaint,

I have seen her make the world look brand new without even breaking a sweat,

but when she speaks of her children her eyes well up,

and she wipes them away,

and she tells *me* she's sorry.

It seems a far cry from heaven, I tell them.

The alien people think about this a long while.

This, too, is heaven, they say.

To live in a place where that kind of love happens, to be able to meet a woman like this.

Maybe we can do something for her, maybe we can make a difference.

Oh what heaven to be able to meet such pain,

an opportunity to serve such a love! Oh, for

now we must live here, but I cannot wait

to have a chance to live in New Jersey!

But, I say, the heartbreak is hell.

But, they say, the heartbreak is heaven, too,

For the breaking of the heart opens the gate to compassion,

and I am not sure quite what they mean but
when they say it something within me feels alive.
It made me eager to share my home with such people.
Who knows how much a simple appreciation
can change the makeup of the world.

You move me, my alien friends, I said,
but I have to be realistic
about the land in which I spend my days.
This heaven you speak of is currently
in a recession,
there is so much striving here,
and so many have lost their jobs,
don't know how they're going to make ends meet.
And even for those who are fortunate to still have jobs
there can be such a sense of desperate
striving to this Garden State.
We are the richest state in a rich country,
but money is just paper,
we have tons and tons of money and yet we feel poor.
Houses and taxes and schools are so expensive,
we never have enough,
To keep our house values up we have to
constantly be renovating our
kitchens and fixing up our living rooms,
and the amount that we spend could buy a well in Africa
so that a whole village
could have drinking water.
Can you imagine that?

The money to build a well in Africa,
in a community threatened daily by thirst and disease,
goes into a new living room.
You call that heaven?

This, too, is heaven, they say.
Energy is matter,
your New Jersey man Einstein said that.
Energy is matter,
potential is a happening yet to be.
Think of it this way:
in each living room you speak of,
there's a well
waiting to be built! An African well
in every living room, what a place you live in!

You see, you don't yet understand the laws of heaven,
you don't understand
the great and mystical laws of New Jersey.
Don't you know that a dream can create
 a world of racial justice?
Don't you know that a dream
 of a green world can create a land
 where people and animals
 live in paradise?

Dreams have great power.
And in each of the houses and apartments,
throughout the state,

there is a space for dreaming.
And these dreams will change the world.
Such are the laws of heaven, such are the laws
of New Jersey.
It is a place of miracles,
a place, we hope,
of resurrection.

Our conversation draws to a close.
I realize I must be returning to my home –
returning to the paved streets and the leafy parks,
returning to the rivers and the highways,
the houses, businesses, hospitals schools filled with
children and wise women, people of many countries
and cultures, black, yellow, white,
rich and poor, the fabric of each person's beautiful little life
embedded in the patchwork quilt
of heaven on earth.

But before I leave them, I ask my hopeful friends
one nagging question of my own. You know,
I say, life here in New Jersey is not forever,
either. There are so many I know who have died,
so many who mourn, and all of us
will only be here for a short span of time.
If this is heaven, here in New Jersey, what happens
when our days have run their course?

They look at me and, for lack of a more accurate description,
shrug their shoulders.

Who knows -
maybe New Jersey again?

It could be worse, I think.
And who knows, what could really be better?

I get ready to travel home
and wake up, ready for one more day
in this land some know
as heaven.

Blessed be,
AMEN