

Story: Close to Heaven

November 3, 2024

Ruth 1:1-18

Mark 12:28-34

It's a funny thing. When you hear just part of a conversation, it can be misleading. I mean, you might think you know what folks are talking about, but it turns out you might not.

In this case, it was a kolea, a Pacific Golden Plover, who overheard some people talking about heaven. And yes, he got confused.

He heard enough to learn that the people talking about heaven believed it was a really nice place. He heard enough to learn that the people talking about heaven didn't expect to go there for some time. He heard enough to learn that the people believed that other creatures could also go to heaven.

He didn't hear anything about it being a new life and a very different kind of place. He didn't hear anything about dying as a transition from one kind of life to another kind of life. They just didn't mention that while he was listening.

But at the end of the conversation, as the people were walking away, one of them said something about heaven being beyond the clouds.

People tend to talk that way about heaven because even though we have telescopes and can look a long way into space, "beyond the clouds" is something most of us don't know much about, and the life God intends for us beyond our lives here is also something we don't know much about. But the kolea didn't know that. He said to himself:

"Those people can't fly beyond the clouds, but I can. I can get to heaven myself."

And he launched himself into the sky.

A kolea migrating from Hawai'i to Alaska, or from Alaska to Hawai'i, can get very high indeed. He flew up over the low clouds that were raining on Hilo. Then he flew up over the middle clouds that were spotted about around the slopes of Mauna Kea. Then he flew up even above the high wispy clouds above Mauna Kea.

Each time, he looked about for signs of heaven.

Each time, he didn't see them.

“I must be close to heaven,” he said.

What he found as he circled higher and higher was that it got colder and colder. He’d felt that before, but as he flew higher than he had before it got colder than he’d ever known. He didn’t like that. He also didn’t like that the air got thinner. Not only was it harder to breathe, he had to flap his wings harder to move enough air to keep flying. In fact, there came a point that he just couldn’t go higher. Gasping, he let himself fall, then circle, and glide back down to the ground.

He landed, still winded, on some grass near another kolea, who hopped over to see what was wrong. “I tried to fly up to heaven,” he said sadly, and told her the story. “I must have been close, but I couldn’t get there.”

“That’s too bad,” she said to him. “Here, take a bite or two. There’s some tasty things here. And you’ll find some good water to drink just over this way.” She led him over to the food, and water, and a safe place to rest.

He ate. He drank. He rested. His breathing settled. His wings regained their strength. He looked at his new friend.

“You know, I flew a long way up to get close to heaven,” he said, “but you’ve been kinder to me than I can remember anyone else being. It might just be that I’ve been closer to heaven here than I ever was up there in the sky.”

by Eric Anderson