

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
November 13, 2005
End Time 3 – Saints Triumphant

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

WE BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

The young man had been a Christian all his life... but there lay the body of his beloved.

He knew that she had been a believer... but there lay the body of his beloved.

All his life he had learned about salvation in Christ... but there lay the body of his beloved.

Everything was a blur –the visitation at the funeral home, then the funeral service at the church, and then the committal in the cemetery. The pastor began, “God is our Refuge and Strength...” Under the canopy, as he stared blankly at the casket his thoughts drifted, “Oh Lord,” he wondered, “I know we talk about departed believers being in heaven, but have you forsaken my beloved? Have you left her behind? Her body is still here!”

At that moment the pastor’s words jolted him back to awareness... *We now commit her body to the ground –earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust –in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.”*

The believers in ancient Thessalonica were wondering when Christ returns would their loved ones be left behind? It stirred in them no little anguish. The answer is not to keep looking at the departed, but to look at Christ. Because of Christ we may confidently say, we believe in the Resurrection of the body.

Some years back there was a news report about 17-year-old boy who slashed 9 people on a subway with a box cutter. Someone

close to him said in an interview, “I still believe he’s a good kid.” In the Creed when we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body,” we don’t mean, “This is my opinion in spite of the obvious facts.” We say we believe in the resurrection because we know it to be a fact. It is true whether we believe it or not.

Under the Holy Spirit’s direction the apostle Paul began the same way –with the facts. He wrote, “*Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again.*” So we start from square one: Christ. Everything depends on Him. His death and resurrection are historical facts so much so, that we can even pinpoint it as being under the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Jesus died and rose again. It is a fact. Therefore we believe it.

The second part of faith is taking it to heart. Jesus died and rose again. He did this not for Himself. He did it for me.

When you see your loved one lying in a casket, or your own life is in jeopardy, it may feel as though God’s truth of the resurrection has skipped over you. But the same Holy Spirit who brought you to faith in Jesus in the first place, also promises to keep you in the true faith and to strengthen your faith in such times. He places it into your heart. Listen to how the Holy Spirit applies the truth of Christ’s resurrection to you and makes it your resurrection, and every believer’s resurrection through the pen of the Apostle Paul: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”*

Because Christ rose, every believer in Christ who has died will also rise. He called you personally by name and gave you ownership of His resurrection at your Baptism.

This is not some flowery, ethereal expression either. In the Bible Job spoke candidly *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes –I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”* We confess the same thing in the Apostles Creed when we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Literally translated from its original Greek, that line is, “I believe in the resurrection of the flesh.” Whose flesh? My flesh, every believer’s flesh. Christ has purchased and saved not only my soul, but also my body. He will return victoriously to claim it. I will come out of my grave.

Because that is true, we draw comfort from it. That is the third aspect of what we mean when we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Did you notice how many times Paul refers to the death of believers as sleep in this Scripture reading? Again, that’s not some flowery, superficial nicety to try to lessen the impact of death. For us who rely on Jesus there is no death. If our sin has been taken away by Jesus, so has our death. Death is sleep.

I suppose this thought would be directed primarily at adults here: imagine what you’d feel if your spouse said, “Honey, I’m going to make sure no one bothers you all afternoon. I want you to take a long nap!” What relief! It makes you kind of ache just to think of it! And doesn’t sleep hold the anticipation that you’ll wake up again refreshed? In the same way death is changed by Christ from something appalling to something harmless and inviting.

When a person wakes up in a hospital bed, the first person they like to see is their spouse or their parent. It will be so comforting that Jesus Himself will wake us up from our graves if we are not still living when He returns. Christ is truly here with us right now in every sense of the word. But in order for us to see Him in our humble sinful condition He hides behind a mask: Words, water, bread and wine. Imagine how wonderful it will be on that day to wake up and see Him –no mask –face to face – every worry, every fear, every sorrow will vanish like smoke.

The apostle Paul wrote, *“After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”*

We believers really have something to talk about with each other, don’t we? You have more to say to each other at a funeral than the people of the world have, more than, “I’m so sorry,” or “He’ll be remembered.” You can say to a fellow believer, “Your loved one lives and will rise again!” Never underestimate how needed and powerful those words are to someone who is grieving.

The resurrection to eternal life will happen on the Last Day when Christ returns. It is part of the victory that the saints triumphant will celebrate, who are triumphant through faith in Christ. Whether you are living or deceased you will not be left behind by Christ. You and every other believer will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Therefore encourage each other with these words.