

+ Third Sunday of End Times – Saints Triumphant: November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 +  
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin  
Pastor Korey Van Kampen  
*“We Have Hope Even in our Grief”*

November 12. It's a date that always sticks in my brain. It sticks first of all because that was the date of the High School football championship game my senior year of high school. My class was blessed to have a number of tremendous athletes (I was not one of them) and so we had set our sights on that date even back in August of that year -- to play in and win the game. But about 14 years after that football game, November 12 became known to me for something else. It was the day my father died. I'm sure you've all been there at some point in your life too -- whether it's a parent, a spouse, even one of your children. Nothing in life gets you ready for that. It's hard. It's a deeper, different kind of pain than any other that we experience. In my case, I felt empty for a good six weeks after it all happened. Though it hits us all in different ways, what's universal about the experience is that it hurts and hurts deeply. We all have grief at one time or another in our lives. There's no escaping that reality. So then, since we should expect to have times of grief in our lives, the question becomes, 'what does it take to get us through it?' It takes hope -- a sure and certain belief that better days are coming. SO then, in the face of grief, how can we have that kind of hope? That's what the Apostle Paul lays out for us in these verses from 1 Thessalonians.

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. <sup>15</sup> In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore, encourage one another with these words.**

These Christians in Thessalonica were quite remarkable. They had endured hardship and persecution almost from the start -- and it didn't faze them at all. In fact, they continued to spread the good news of Jesus even in the face of this persecution. But, given what they had faced, there was one question that was still largely unanswered in their minds. What was going to happen to their fellow believers who died before Jesus returned in his glory? Would they be lost because of this? Were they, in some way, going to miss out on the joys of eternity? They knew to live in anticipation of Jesus' return -- but they didn't know what that meant for those who had already died. So Paul wrote to instruct and encourage them. His words also are good for us to consider when we face the deaths of people we care about.

He says, **“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope.”** There's something really important to notice here in the way Paul speaks. He doesn't say that he doesn't want us to grieve. No, he says that he doesn't want us to grieve like the rest of the world does -- that is, to grieve without hope. This means that when we

lose someone we love, it is OK to grieve. It is OK to hurt. It is OK to feel deep sadness and sorrow. It's OK to have days when you don't want to leave your house. It's OK, it's good to have all those kinds of feelings. You don't need to feel like there's something wrong with you -- like you're a weak Christian or something like that -- if you are deeply sad at the death of a loved one. We grieve because we loved. Paul writes what he does here not to say, 'don't grieve', but to give you a path forward in your grief -- to give you hope.

Often we use the word 'hope' to describe a wish or desire for a positive future. In August, I had a lot of hope that the Cowboys would have a good football team this year -- make the playoffs and make some noise there. We'll let's just say that those hopes have not panned out the way I wanted to. Thankfully, Christian hope is different than that. It's not just an optimistic wish or a dream for a better tomorrow. No, it is a sure and certain belief that a better tomorrow is coming. So how can you be sure and certain about the future -- even when we don't know it? It comes from events in the past -- events whose significance is so great that they shape our eternal future. Paul says, "**We believe that Jesus died and rose again.**" These two events are historical facts. This is one of the biggest things that sets Christianity apart from every other religion of the world -- the key events that form the basis of our faith are historically verifiable events that happened in public. You can look in history and see that there was a person named Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified under the Roman governor Pilate. You can look at the eyewitness accounts in the gospels and the subsequent transformation of the Apostles from men who were full of fear into bold witnesses for Christ and know that Jesus did not stay dead. Jesus died and rose again. These are historical facts.

Now what do those facts mean? Why is it important that Jesus died and rose again? When people die, the death certificate always lists a cause of death. For my dad, it was stage 4 prostate cancer. For others, it can be pneumonia, heart disease, or other organ failure. But no matter what the outward cause of death, there is one cause that lies beneath them all -- sin. What do we know about everyone who dies? They were sinners. The Bible says, "**The wages of sin is death**" -- that is, the payment that sin earns us is death. Which means that, no matter how much we love those who have died, no matter how many fond memories we have of them, they were sinners. That's why they died. And the fact that we're sinners means we're going to die too. That's what sin does. It kills. It kills physically, spiritually, and eternally. And that is why Jesus came and that's why he died. The one who had no sin was sent to become sin for us. When Jesus died it wasn't under any sin of his own -- but every sin of the human race, which means every sin of yours and mine. As it was written by Isaiah, "**The Lord laid on him the guilt of us all.**" But death wasn't the end of Jesus' story. He rose again, in his own body. The resurrection proves that Jesus defeated sin, that his death was accepted as the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sin. And now he lives in glory with God, never to die again. Death's power has been broken. We can have hope in our grief because Jesus died and rose again.

And because Jesus died and rose again, there are two big changes in how we look at things. The first change has to do with how we view death. Did you notice how Paul spoke of death in these verses? He brought up the concept three times, but only once used the word dead. The other two times he spoke of "**those who have fallen asleep.**" When Paul talks about death as falling asleep, we might think that he's just trying to use a nice way to talk about a not nice thing -- much in the same way that people don't use the term funeral so

much anymore -- now it's a celebration of life. But that's not at all what he's doing. Instead, he's describing a new reality that exists precisely because Jesus died and rose again. Now, for those who are in Jesus Christ, death is not the end. Death is not 'good bye forever.' Now death is just like going to sleep. And what do we know about those who fall asleep? We know they're going to wake up. So then, we're not afraid to lay our own heads on the pillow at night, nor to watch our loved ones fall asleep because we know that we'll soon get to wake up and see them the next day. In the same way, laying down on death's pillow loses its bite of fearfulness, because Jesus will wake up those who sleep in him to a glorious new eternal day. Yes, death is now just a sleep. And all this happens because Jesus died and rose again.

The second big truth that comes as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection is that we all now look forward to the glorious day of Jesus' return. The thought of Jesus returning to judge the living and the dead can sometimes make us feel squeamish. We feel that way because we have an inner sense of our own sin and guilt. We have doubts about whether we'd measure up on that day. But now, because Jesus died and rose, our sins have been taken away and our guilt is removed -- they're blotted out forever from God's record book. And in their place, we receive the perfect record of Jesus. We don't have to worry about if we've measured up because Jesus measured up for us and he died in our place. Now we can simply look forward to the return of Jesus as the day when he finally takes us all home.

And what a day that will be. Paul gives us a glimpse of what it will be like. **"We who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep."** Those who have died before Jesus' return will not be at any disadvantage on that day. Nobody will miss out. **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.** When Jesus returns, he's going to come on the clouds of heaven -- and nobody will miss it. Everyone will see it, everyone will hear it. Everyone will know what's happening -- and the first thing to happen is those who have died in faith in Jesus Christ will rise to life again. Then, immediately **after that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.** We'll be taken out of this world together with them to meet our Lord. **And so we will be with the Lord forever.** And as great as it will be to once again see all our loved ones who died in Christ, that's not the best part. The best part -- the part of eternity that we all look forward to most of all -- is to be with Jesus forever -- forever in his presence, forever in his love, forever in his joy, and forever in his peace.

It was, I believe, CS Lewis who described it this way. Think of the greatest things you know of in this life -- the beauty of nature, the joys of friendship, the excitement of romance, the security of love -- all these things are but a shadow, a dim reflection, the mere beginning of the inexpressible joy that comes from being in the presence of Jesus forever. And this future is ours because Jesus died and rose again.

The world we live in will tell you that death is just the end and that this life is all that you have. If that's the case, then yes, when someone dies, or when we face our own death, we have no hope. But, we, children of God, can have hope in our grief. Because we know that Jesus died and rose again, we know that death is not the end. That's why Paul closes this section with a simple direction: **Therefore encourage each other with these words.** Encourage each other with the truth about Jesus' death and resurrection. Encourage each

other with the truth that our sin has been defeated. Encourage each other with the truth the death is now but a sleep. Encourage each other with the truth that Jesus will come and raise to life all who died believing in him -- and we'll all be with him forever. Encourage each other with these words because they are the words that give us hope even in our grief.

We don't just wish -- we know that a better day is coming. The work of Jesus seals it. That's why we have hope. Amen!