

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity (All Saints)
St. Matthew 9:18-26: "Shall We Laugh at Jesus or at Death?"
November 2/3, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O almighty and everlasting God, by Your dear Son You have promised us forgiveness of our sins and deliverance from eternal death: We pray that by Your Holy Spirit You will daily increase our faith in Your grace through Christ, and establish in us the certain hope that we shall not die, but peacefully sleep, and be raised on the last day to eternal life and salvation; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 164)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

While [Jesus] was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before Him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus rose and followed him, with His disciples. / And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His garment, for she said to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I will be made well." / Jesus turned, and seeing her He said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. / And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, He said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at Him. But when the crowd had been put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went through all that district. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, through whom we are called to everlasting sainthood by faith in His name, dear fellow redeemed:

We have recently finished watching the Ken Burns documentary on *The Civil War*. When the war finally came to an end, the documentary detailed the reaction of the soldiers at that moment. After four years of fighting, we might expect to hear about union men shouting for joy and jumping up and down. But that was not their reaction. Their mood was quiet and subdued. They couldn't help but think what it took to get to this point. They remembered all the lives lost, both the Americans on their side and the Americans on the other. How could they cheer? How could they celebrate?

Nearly as many soldiers died in the Civil War as have died in all other American wars combined. There was probably no family that was not touched by a soldier's death. But death is not just confined to war. Death has touched each of us through the loss of family members and friends. Death comes because of sin. Romans 5:12 says, "*Therefore, just as sin came into the world*

through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." You and I are sinners. That means one day, death will come to us too.

Death is no laughing matter. This is why the crowd standing around the bed of a dead girl was so offended when Jesus said, *"the girl is not dead but sleeping."* Was this some sort of sick joke? Who did Jesus think He was to come in and announce this? What a cruel statement to make in front of the grief-stricken parents of the girl! Matthew tells us that the crowd *"laughed at Him."* It was a spiteful laugh, full of ridicule. They despised Jesus.

I'm sure the same thing would happen today if Jesus showed up at a "celebration of life" party and announced that the deceased was *"not dead, but sleeping."* He would be laughed out of the room, or thrown out. I hope the same would not happen at a Christian funeral. The main theme at a Christian funeral is not how wonderful the deceased person was. It is not about how we will keep his or her memory alive. It is not about being comforted that the one we loved is watching over us and is still in our hearts. That may be how unbelievers deal with death, but it should not be that way for us who believe.

A Christian funeral is about Christ. It is a beautiful opportunity to be reminded of the hope and comfort we have in Him. If Jesus is not the focus, if He is not in the room, there can be no comfort. Without Jesus, there is only sadness. Then flute players sound the woeful songs of death, and people weep and wail loudly like they did at the house of the little girl (Mar. 5:38).

When Jesus came on the scene, He chided the people gathered there. He told them to stop their commotion and weeping. He chided them like a mother might when her noisy children are playing near a napping baby. *"Go away,"* said Jesus, *"for the girl is... sleeping."* When the crowd had been put outside, then the house was quiet. Jesus was there, along with Peter, James, and John, and the girl's parents.

The girl lay there unmoving, her heart stopped, no breath crossing her lips. By all scientific standards, she was dead. But Jesus walked over, He took her by the hand, and He said, *"Little girl, I say to you, arise"* (Mar. 5:41). Who was laughing now? Not death. Death had to give up its victim. Jesus gave the command, and death had to comply. Immediately the girl woke up as though from sleep, and she got up and started walking around.

The old saying states that *"nothing is as certain as death and taxes."* But this account gives us reason to question that. In this case, the status of death was not certain. Death was able to be overcome. It was overcome by Jesus. So why are people still laughing at Jesus? They *have* to laugh—or else believe in Him. Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (Joh. 11:25). He said, *"Because I live, you also will live"* (Joh. 14:9). He said that to Him, death is nothing but a temporary slumber.

He said these things because He was about to conquer death, once and for all. He was going to put Himself in the jaws of death, and so occupy it, so that death could turn its attention to nobody else. The battle was on! Here was Jesus with His confident promises of victory and life facing death with its record of countless victories over humanity. In one of his hymns, Martin Luther said about this battle, *"It was a strange and dreadful strife / When life and death contended"* (ELH 343, v. 4). Who would win?

It appeared that death had conquered when Jesus was lowered from the cross and placed in a dark tomb. That's what His friends thought, including Peter, James, and John. But death did not overcome Jesus. Jesus overcame death. He rose again! "*Death no longer has dominion over him*" (Rom. 6:9). That means it no longer has dominion over us. Paul writes that all who are baptized into Christ partake in His resurrection victory. Because He conquered, they conquer. Because He lives, they live.

But unbelievers reject this hope. They laugh at our confidence in Jesus' promises. "If your Lord is so powerful," they say, "why do you Christians end up the same as us? You shouldn't need cemeteries if death has no power over you!" It is true that believers are buried "six feet under" just like unbelievers are. There is no obvious difference between them once they die. The same cold earth is dumped over the remains of both.

But believers view the burial of one of their own very differently than unbelievers do. Believers lay their brothers and sisters in Christ to rest in the sure hope of the resurrection. They tuck their loved one in a soft casket like a parent tucks his child in bed. They comfort one another with the certainty that their loved one is "*not dead, but sleeping*." Jesus is going to come again, just like He came to the side of the little girl, and He is going to raise the dead.

This will happen because Jesus has promised it. The One who defeated death should be taken seriously. When He does this on the last day, then all the world will know who is victorious. Paul writes that "*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'*" (1Co. 15:54-55). On that day, we will laugh at death, because it can no longer touch us.

But you don't have to wait until the last day to laugh at death. You can laugh at death right now. I know that death looks scary. I know it has a ferocious growl. But all its teeth are missing. Jesus knocked them out when He marched back up the throat of death and out of the mouth of the grave. It comes down to this: either Jesus is Lord, or death is Lord; either Jesus conquers, or death conquers; either Jesus reigns, or death reigns. Death cannot defeat those who are in Christ.

The times that we are overwhelmed by death are the times that we have looked away from Jesus. If we trusted Jesus' promise of the resurrection and eternal life, we would not weep so bitterly for our loved ones. We would not wish for the comfort of their presence more than the comfort of our Lord's presence. We would not look backward with so much grief instead of forward with so much hope.

Those who do not look to Jesus try to cope with death in other ways. Some reach for the bottle or attempt to fill the void of loss with things. Some become despondent or angry and shut people out of their life. Some try to connect with the dead through psychics or mediums. Some feel life is not worth living, and they seek to end it. These methods offer no help at all. Nothing we come up with can give comfort in the face of death.

Our only comfort is from the Lord. He is the answer for the pain death causes. He is our assurance that death does not have the upper hand. Though it seems to prevail over all flesh, Jesus will make it give up the dead again. Jesus will raise all the dead and will bring all the saints to be with Him in heaven.

The saints are all believers, whether dead or living. They are those whose sins are no longer held against them, and who are declared holy in God's sight through faith. Even now God calls you a saint, because you believe and confess that Jesus *"was delivered up for [your] trespasses and raised for [your] justification"* (Rom. 4:25).

Jesus' victory over sin and death is your victory. Yes, one day your body will give out and die, yet Jesus will not leave your body in the grave. He will raise you again as if from sleep, because to Him death is nothing more than sleep. Because Jesus has overcome death, death must do His bidding, which is to deliver us from this sinful world to the glories of heaven.

So **Shall We Laugh at Jesus or at Death?** The answer is found in Jesus' empty tomb. We now laugh with Jesus at death. Death did not win. Death *will not* win. *"[T]hanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1Co. 15:57).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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