

The Third to Last Sunday of the Church Year
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: "Put Your Hope in the Resurrected One."
November 7/8, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, who by Your Son promised us forgiveness of sins and deliverance from everlasting death, strengthen us, we humbly ask You, by Your Holy Spirit, that our trust in Your grace in Christ Jesus may daily increase and that with sure confidence we may hold fast the blessed hope that we shall not die, but only sleep, and at the Last Day be raised up unto everlasting life; through the same Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 176)

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 fourth chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. / For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. ^(ESV)

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

In Christ Jesus, who gives us hope in our uncertainties and comfort in our struggles and sorrows, dear fellow redeemed:

We could list a lot of things that make us feel more pessimistic than optimistic about the future. Our country is divided politically, and the sides seem to be moving further apart rather than closer together. We have ongoing concerns about a virus that infects more people each day. We wonder how stable the economy will be going forward. But in the middle of these divisions and uncertainties, the inspired words of today's text give us hope.

The apostle Paul sent these words to the Christians in Thessalonica. He had preached and taught among them for only a short time before he was forced to leave the town. Some jealous opponents had stirred up a mob against him and even dragged one of the new Christian converts before the authorities (Act. 17:1-10). From this time forward, it would have been uncomfortable and perhaps even dangerous to be a Christian in Thessalonica.

But the Thessalonians remained faithful. They endured suffering and waited eagerly for Christ's return in glory. They were told to expect His second coming very soon. But as time passed, these new Christians faced a new problem. Some of their fellow believers were dying. What were they to make of that? Would the dead miss out on the glorious return of Jesus and the promise of eternal life in heaven?

Paul's letter brought them great comfort. He referred to the dead in the same way Jesus had spoken about a deceased little girl, that she was "*not dead but sleeping*" (Mar. 5:39). The crowd laughed at Jesus then, but they weren't laughing when He took her by the hand and brought her back to life. For Jesus, waking the dead is just as easy as waking someone up from a nap. Death is only a sleep to Him, a temporary, peaceful slumber.

We should not wonder if Jesus can do this. We have the examples of His raising the little girl, the young man from Nain, and His friend Lazarus. But the most compelling evidence of Jesus' power over death is His own resurrection from the dead. Not only could He raise others, He could even raise Himself! Now that's power!

A whole bunch of people regard Jesus as a good teacher but nothing more. They lump Him in with teachers like Confucius, Buddha, or Muhammed. But when those men died, they stayed dead. Their flesh decayed, and perhaps by now their bones have even turned to dust. Jesus died, but His flesh did not see corruption. Death held Him for parts of three days—and only because He let it.

He entered death when He wanted to, and He left it again when He wanted to. There was nothing death could do to stop Him. Death was utterly overcome, defeated. Jesus triumphed over death and will never be subject to it again. That means death won't be able to overcome us who trust in Him. "But how can you be so sure?" the skeptic asks. "Show me an example in modern history of someone being dead for a matter of days and coming back to life again."

The world always wants proof on its terms. Past evidence does not count. They need to see it with their own eyes today. We sinners repeat the same mistakes as the sinners of the past. We hardly ever learn. Each generation thinks it is better and smarter and more righteous than the generations before it. It is our common human pride and conceit.

This self-centeredness is why many refuse to believe that Jesus rose from the dead two thousand years ago or that He will raise the dead in the future. They are like doubting Thomas. They won't trust the multiple eyewitness accounts of others. They need to see it with their own eyes, or they won't believe it (Joh. 20:24-25). "If Jesus has this power," they say, "let Him come down here and show us. If He brings someone back from the dead, then we will believe in Him."

But even that wouldn't be enough. Sinful people always find something to question, some reason for doubt. If Jesus came back and raised a dead person to life, many would say it was a trick. They would come up with some logical explanation for it. Seeing would not lead to them believing.

Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"* (Joh. 20:29). He wants us to take Him at His Word. He has the right to expect that, doesn't He? After all, He is the one who predicted His own resurrection and then followed through on it. If He made good on that promise, why wouldn't He make good on His promise to raise the dead on the last day?

Paul made it clear that he wasn't putting down his own opinions or wishes in his letter. He said, *"this we declare to you by a word from the Lord."* The Lord promises that those who are alive when He comes on the last day will not have any advantage over those who are asleep in their graves. He will come with a great shout, and His powerful Word will awaken the dead. Then all believers will rise with glorified bodies that no longer show any effect of sin.

After the dead have risen, *"we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."* The word translated *"caught up"* has the sense of a sudden and intense action. We will be snatched up to the clouds by the Lord. We won't have to wait for our redemption. It will happen immediately when Jesus comes.

It won't come a moment too soon. We long for Jesus' return. This world is not where we want to be. As Christians first sang in the 12th century, so we still sing, *"The world is very evil, / The times are waxing late"* (ELH #534, v. 1). In the Holy Gospel for today (Mat. 24:15-28), Jesus describes the tribulation of the end times. *"[I]f those days had not been cut short,"* He said, *"no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."*

So what is Jesus waiting for? The apostle Peter reminds us *"that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."* (2Pe. 3:8-9). Jesus is not sleeping on the job or dragging His feet. He is showing patience with sinners. He wants them all to repent and be saved and join Him in heaven.

But we are not patient like our Lord is. This is why many are tempted to follow after *"false christs and false prophets"* (Mat. 24:24). We are tempted to follow after the smooth-talking liars who promise a prosperous life here on earth, a life without suffering, a life without trouble. Even if they could deliver on those promises, these false teachers can't give life to the dead. Anyone who promises hope and salvation apart from the crucified and risen Christ is of the devil.

Apart from Jesus, there is no reason to be hopeful about anything. But with Jesus, we are filled with hope. So while our country is divided, and many of our politicians seem more interested in serving themselves than others, Jesus reigns as King over all things at the right hand of the Father. While people are getting sick this year at higher rates than usual, Jesus has the power to heal the sick or bring the souls of believers to heaven to be with Him. While there may be uncertainty in our financial plans and holdings, Jesus has secured eternal riches for us that will never pass away.

You can wring your hands and worry and lose sleep trying to control things you can't control – and we all do plenty of that. But the Lord calls you to trust in Him, to trust that He will keep His promises toward you. Now leaving your life and your future in God's hands like this is difficult. Your sinful flesh does not want to give up any of its independence or its perceived

power. If you are going to place your trust in Him, you want proof that He isn't going to let you down.

"You want proof?" He says. "Then look at Me hanging on the cross for you, shedding My blood to cleanse you from your sins. And come look into My empty tomb. I left it because death could not conquer Me. I rose from the dead to win victory over your death. *I am the resurrection and the life.*" Jesus will not leave you to fight for yourself in this evil world. He came to save you not because He had to but because He wanted to. And He still fights for you, coming to give you strength through His Word and Sacraments and dwelling within you by faith.

As long as you have Jesus, your situation will never be hopeless. He promises to carry you through all your pain and sorrow in this short life and to take your soul to be with Him when you breathe your last. Then He promises to come again to wake your body from its peaceful sleep, so that you can enjoy the eternal bliss of heaven in both body and soul.

You can be certain of your resurrection because His resurrection is certain. The Holy Spirit states it definitively through the mouth of Paul: "*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.*" **Put Your Hope in the Resurrected One.** Then you will have a living hope, a hope that no one can take from you, a hope that will never die.

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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