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Peace, Sun Prairie
November 18, 2018
End Time 3 - Saints Triumphant

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
A TRIUMPHANT DAY

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!” When you sing that song later in the service, it’s like we’re viewing you through X-ray glasses and seeing you for who you really are. You are singing the very words of heaven which Isaiah witnessed before the great throne of the Almighty. The Bible says, *Your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* To look at you we see only your mortal flesh and blood. The Bible says it is a mortal flesh and blood infected with sin. But when you were baptized a new life began in you, -a holy, heavenly life, an indestructible and everlasting life, a life shining with the glory of Christ. And though your mortal voice may register as thin and ragged here, it is reverberating off the arches with full and throaty timbre among the triumphant assembly in heaven.

Mortality. Mortality inflicts all -believer and unbeliever alike. There would appear to be no difference. Walk

through cemetery. Believers and unbeliever die. But on the Last Day when Christ returns this mortal existence will be shed from us believers completely whether we are dead or alive. Our new, everlasting life will be one hundred percent visible. This is the encouragement the Apostle Paul gave to the Christian church in the city of Thessalonica about the year AD 52. They were concerned about their loved ones who had died. Would they be left behind when Christ returned? What if they themselves died? Would they miss out on the triumph of heaven?

To answer their concerns, Paul began the only way we can begin: with Jesus. Jesus died and rose again. That's ground zero for everything. Apart from that there is no life with God, no rescue from death, no heaven. Notice in this reading, because Jesus died, we believers do not die. We only fall asleep. Jesus died... He took the punishment for our sin on Himself. That was death. Yes, it's true at some point that we will stop breathing. Our hearts will stop beating. Our bodies will decay. But we are not dead. Only asleep. Think of what that word, asleep, suggests. It means we will wake up again. Our bodies will be awakened from death. It means even after we die, we are still alive and Christ will raise us up from the dead. Listen again to 1 Thessalonians 4:

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 others, who have no hope. 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.

You'll notice that this portion of Scripture is not addressing the matter of unbelievers and what will happen to them. It's just spelling out what will happen to us believers on the Last Day -that it will be a triumphant day. But what does it mean when it says God will "bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus?" The Apostle Paul went on to explain how God will do this: *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. 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.*

It makes me think of childhood. Have you ever fallen asleep in the backseat of the car on the way home. Then you woke up and it was morning and there you were in your bed! How did you get there? I can imagine that's

how it will be for believers in Christ who have died and will be raised, or shall we say, awakened on the Last Day.

Have you ever noticed that many religions do not look forward to a resurrection of the body? They may speak only of a person's spirit making a journey on to the afterlife. They may bury with the deceased food or other material items the individual might need for that journey. But as far as the body is concerned it is just left behind and remains in the earth. Some religions believe in reincarnation -but that is no resurrection. That would just be an existence of repeated death over and over. But the true God gives us His own Word that the resurrection of the body, your body, is real and true. Jesus loved you so much that He redeemed not only your soul for heaven but your body as well -every part of it: fingers, hair, liver, shins, shoulder blades. On the last day He will not leave your body behind. He will recreate your body, even if there's nothing left of you but bones or dust. Wasn't He able to bring the whole world to existence out of nothing? He will bring you back to life in your body. Except this time your body will no longer have sin nor suffer the effects of sin.

If you are still living when Christ returns the Bible says your body will be transformed instantly, in the twinkling of an eye and you will still be you in your body, but you will become imperishable and immortal. 1 Thessalonians explains what will happen next: *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with [the dead believers who were brought to life] to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.* Jesus has no interest in establishing some kind of kingdom here on earth. He will come to whisk us away from this world and rescue us out of it.

A few minutes ago we observed the Rite of Saints Triumphant listing those fellow believers of Peace congregation who have died in the past year. It is hard to see a loved one in a casket. Harder yet to leave them behind in a cemetery. Sometimes thoughts of our own death can fill us with dread and anxiety. What if my body ends up somewhere where no one can find me? Sometimes the complications of our lives, messes of our own making, guilty secrets we are worn out from carrying, all of it eventually leading to the grave can make the whole scenario even more dismal for us.

But take a lesson from Paul and begin with Jesus. By His death on the cross He atoned for all your sin. You are forgiven. It will not be dredged up by God on the Last Day. No judgment awaits you. By His own resurrection Jesus promises you a resurrection from the dead. After raising you from the grave He will take you and all believers to Himself. Not a hair of your head will have been forgotten. Not a hair of your head will perish.

On that Day you will see yourself and all fellow believers as you truly are -the saints triumphant. Death, satan, hell, suffering, craving, hostility, loneliness -from all of it you will come out released and be victorious - not by anything you have resolved but as a gift from Jesus. When you see all your fellow believers rising, shining and you along with them being caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and with them you sing once again words you are already so familiar with, words of your native language: holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts...

...it will be a good day.
It will be a triumphant day.