

St. Luke's UMC
June 13, 2021

Everyday Hope
Hope When We Grieve
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

What strange words we hear today in Paul's *Letter to the Thessalonians*: "The Lord will descend with a loud summons...the archangel shall call...the trumpet of God will sound...the dead in Christ will rise...then we will be caught up in the clouds and meet the Lord in the air." This reads more like a trailer for a sci-fi movie than scripture, but this much is clear: whatever Paul is describing here it is in the context of a most relatable, practical human experience: "let us not grieve as those who have no hope." Paul comes now to a place in his letter in which he shares hope for people who are grieving.

These verses reveal what was the first theological crisis in the church: people of faith who died. I call it a crisis because of what people believed about the return of Christ. The theological word for this is *eschatology*. This has to do with the study of the end times. Jesus himself had taught that at the completion of history he would return. Paul believed in his early ministry that this would happen in his lifetime and that people who turned to Christ would experience his return.

Today we might consider such thinking as foolishness or naivete but understand this thinking is still prevalent. When I started my ministry there was all kinds of talk about a book titled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Come in 1988*. In case you didn't read the book, that didn't happen. But millions of people read it and believed. Some sold their houses and cashed out savings accounts because they were convinced.

We believe Paul changed his mind on this matter latter in his ministry, but in the early days like when he visited Thessalonica, he was convinced, this caused a crisis in the early church. What were people to think when their loved ones who became Christian died? Did their deaths mean they weren't worthy of seeing Christ return? Did this mean that God's promises were not true? In fact, this may have been a place of attack for the philosophers and even the Jewish religious leaders who were threatened by the Christian influence. They may have been saying to the church, "See, you believe Christ would return, and now your loved ones are dying. You have believed a hoax!" And so the church sends a question to Paul, how are we to make sense of death?

That is part of the reason Paul addressed this topic. He writes to offer a Christian understanding of what happens when we die. And what Paul shares was a radical new belief. As we talked about early in this series, in Roman society people had a very apathetic view of death, that there is nothing more after death. We see this in a first century letter from a person named Irene to friends who lost a loved one it says, "I was as sorry and wept over the departed as I did for Didymas...but nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another."

Some comfort, huh?

Now, in Greek society many people believed in a concept of immortality, but more like a freeing of the soul from the body, because everything earthly is bad, and so death means a the soul is liberated. But when Paul preached about a resurrection of the body, this was a baffling concept. He uses Jewish apocalyptic language to speak about the day of Christ's return and the trumpet of God sounding, not to say this is literally how it will happen, but to make the point that there will be a resurrection for all creation. This world is not something to escape from, but to get ready for that day.

So think of the implications of such a belief. It means what we do in this life matters. It matters how we care for our bodies. It matters how we can for the planet. It matters how we care for each other. This is why the writers of the creed were clear to say, "We believe in the resurrection *of the body!*"

So notice how Paul uses two different words for dying in this passage. Paul begins by saying, "**Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uniformed about those who sleep in death...**" Here he speaks of death as like a falling asleep. But then, in the next verse he writes, "**We believe that Jesus died and rose again...**" Here he speaks of death as a death. Why the two distinctions? Paul is making the point that because Jesus died and rose again, death for us is now something from which we shall have an awakening.

This is kind of a silly example, but just over a month ago I had surgery to repair a hernia. Dr. Larry Stevens in our church did the procedure. I've had church members before who have gotten under my skin, but Larry literally did! Larry Stevens is a most compassionate doctor and I got to experience that first hand. As I was being prepped he told me everything they were doing, and then as the anesthesia was being administered Larry, just gently padded my arm, and said, "Relax. Relax. I'll see you in a little while." And those were the last words I remember, "I'll see you in a little while." And when I woke up it was as if no time at all had passed.

This is what Paul says death will be like for those who put their faith in Christ. He will be with us, whispering for us to relax and assuring us that in just a little while he will greet us. This doesn't diminish the difficulty leading up to death. It doesn't remove any pain that may be involved. But it means in a spiritual way, Christ is a real presence, comforting us, and assuring us, that because he rose from death, our death is now just a momentary, pausing. We will wake up without any sense of the time that has passed, and Christ will be there to greet us along with all who have gone before us.

Paul may have been wrong on his timing, but what is really wants to communicate is that we all, dead or alive, are God's care and keeping, and one day we will awake to a new heaven and new earth, when life is at it should be.

Paul writes to give the Thessalonians a Christian understanding of death and eternal life, but that's not the only reason Paul writes. He knows the questions of the church are not just theological. They are not academic. And they are not just asking about loved ones who have died. They are also asking, where can I find hope when I'm grieving?

So Paul writes to say, “**do not grieve like those who have no hope.**”(v.13) Notice Paul doesn't say, “do not grieve” period! He clearly makes the point that people with hope still grieve. That's an important, because many people through history have interpreted Paul's words here to mean that since you have hope you can't shouldn't grieve, that grieving shows a lack of faith.

We see this as early as the 4th century in the words of a church leader named St. Chrysostom who wrote, “But you are Christians, you believe in the resurrection, you live and die in hope, why should you mourn the dead excessively?” (Navarre Bible Commentary *Thessalonians*, p49) This idea that grieving shows lack of faith has been around a long time. But Paul doesn't call us to hide grief. He acknowledges that Christians still grieve.

In my office I have a large amount of books shelves covered with books and when people see them for the first time they sometimes ask, “So have you read all those books?” And I say, “No! Many of these books were given to me. I wait until I have need of consulting them.” So when I am working on sermons the first thing I do is consult the books I have. So working on this message, I looked at books I already have pertaining to grief and I found this one, *Don't Take My Grief from Me* by a pastor in Oklahoma named Doug Manning. I don't know who gave it to me or how I got it, but I regret not reading this years ago. This is such a helpful read for anyone walking through grief. Working through experiences of his own grief, along with walking with others through grief, he devoted his ministry to studying grief. His book helps people so well understand their grief and gives them permission to grieve.

In one place he talks about how religion gets in the way. We so focus on faith making people better, and life easier, that we make it hard to grieve when life is not easy. He says, “Too often religion only tells one side of the story...(p75)

In preparation for the message today I consulted a number of people in our church who have experienced grief and asked if they would share about their experience. These are people of various ages who lost parents, friends, and some children. Some of the deaths were by suicide. One was a miscarriage. Many others were from cancer or sickness or aging. I found the similarities in their answers very interesting.

Many described their grief as an intense emptiness and also a heaviness. I found that interesting because those sound like opposite feelings which is probably why there is an emotional toll in grief. These emotions that bounce around are tiring and so a lot of folks talk about having a hard time with energy when they go through grief. They say, “I just felt tired all the time.”

Many people talked about their tears and how sometimes it it's hard to stop crying, which again can be frustrating because you can't get control of your emotions, and so you're aware how uncomfortable this makes other people, so many folks talked about how they feel the need to hide their grief, because they might not be able to control their emotions. Therefore another difficulty in grief was being public. You just don't know if you might lose it.

So perhaps not surprising, many people said one of the hardest things about grief was going to church. Because church was something they shared with a loved one, it was difficult for that reason but also because they felt the need to stay in control of their emotions and they couldn't guarantee that.

Also, many could not be with loved ones during Covid and that caused lingering pain for people who know their loved one died alone. And Covid also compounded the loneliness. Many, especially older persons who lost a spouse said they missed physical touch, and during Covid they couldn't be with family. They couldn't get a hug or feel someone hold their hand.

When I asked what do you wish you knew about grief before going through it, several said "I wished someone had warned me that it takes a while. Give yourself permission to grieve. It won't be quick. Sometimes you will think you're over it. Life is moving on, and then you get knocked down by a wave."

Others also said they wished they knew that grief isn't the same for everyone. When they heard others talked about their grief and how it sounded so different from their own experience they wondered what was wrong with them. They wished someone had said, "It's okay to have *your* experience. There's no standard."

Also, nearly everyone talked about the importance of family connections. Being able to talk about and remember a loved one. They said around many people they are afraid to mention a loved one because they think its going to make the pain worse, and yet, being able to remember a loved one is what is so helpful.

I conducted a funeral a couple months ago in which we did the burial the day before. It was at a family cemetery about an hour north, way out in the country. About 30 members of the family came. We stood around the burial site and everyone shared a memory. The next day after the funeral service, which was beautiful and powerful, many of the family members commented to me how meaningful the service the day before was. That was what was really helpful.

Also, a number of people mentioned having ways to mark the anniversary of a loved one's death is helpful. Family and friends getting together to tell stories and share memories about a loved one is very important.

I appreciate all these folks who shared their experiences and hope it will be of help to you. Paul makes it clear that people of faith still grieve, but he does make the point that our grief is different. Our hope does help us. We don't grieve as people who have no hope. And when Paul talks about the Day of the Lord, the day of Jesus' return and the fulfillment of history and the Final Judgement and heaven, he is reminding us that we are on a journey. We are on a path. We are going somewhere. And when we believe that, then we understand that wherever we are right now is not a place we are going to stay.

If we are in a place of grief, it's part of our journey. All the feelings, challenges, emotions that are part of our journey right now, are just that, where we are now. But we won't stay here. This is just part of our healing. This is why accepting these emotions and giving ourselves opportunity to grieve is significant, they are part of the path that leads to a better place. Many counselors say that a big part of healing through grief is to let ourselves help others in their grief, even if we are still struggling ourselves. Listening to others, sharing with them, helps us.

Our hope is knowing that we are headed to a better place. We won't stay here forever. We are on a journey. And one day our journey will lead us to a place where we will be together again with those we love, and we will be joined fully with Christ.

John Wesley's brother, Charles, wrote over 6,000 hymns in his life, but the most unique Charles Wesley hymn in our hymnal is number 656. It's unusual because it doesn't have music with it which is why we've never sung it in church before. Its titled "*If Death My Friend and Me Divide.*" You have to wonder when you hear these verses if Charles Wesley wrote them as a result of his own experience of losing a friend. Listen to the last 2 stanzas:

*I feel a strong immortal hope, which bears my spirit up, beneath its mountain load,
redeemed from death and grief and pain, I shall soon find my friend again, within the
arms of God.*

*Pass a few fleeting moments more, and death the blessing shall restore, which death
has snatched away; for me thou wilt the summons send, and give me back my parted
friend, in that eternal day.*

When we have that hope, it really does change how we face the pain of this life. I love this quote by E. Stanley Jones: "Since life's last word for me is to be Easter, I don't mind if life's latest word for me is a cross."

I'll close with this story. James Harnish is a retired United Methodist pastor who has written a number of books. In one of them he tells about his father who died of cancer before he turned 60. Jim says he was a strong believer in the hope of resurrection. During one of their last visits together a long time business associate came to see him. Harnish says he remembered they talked about everything except what mattered most, death. As the man left, he shook Jim's father's hand, called his name and said, "Well, I guess we can always hope for a miracle." His father accepted the words as an attempt to be encouraging, but after he left he looked at Jim and said, "You know, its hard for some of my friends to accept that resurrection is a miracle too. I'm grateful that I don't have to have all my miracles on this side of Resurrection." ([Strong in the Broken Places](#), p134)