

Sermon on **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** for **Saints Triumphant Sunday**  
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church Pastor Nate Scharf 11.18.18

**Comfort at the Casket. Eyes focused on Christ. Rejoicing at the Reunion.**

Do you remember the first funeral you attended? I'm sure I was at my great aunt Lal's funeral as a young child, but I can't remember. The first funeral I do remember was for a girl a few grades ahead of me in grade school. She had a long battle against a brain tumor and then she died. We all sang for her funeral. Since then there have been many. Funerals force us to deal with some questions and uncomfortable realities. Death isn't natural, though it is common. God never wanted it. It is a consequence of the fall into sin by Adam and Eve. It's not something we like to think about, but it is unavoidable and causes grief and tears. The Christians in Thessalonica had questions about their loved ones who had died in the Lord and we as well. Paul gives reason for:

- 1) comfort at the casket.**
- 2) focusing our eyes on Christ Jesus.**
- 3) rejoicing at the reunion.**

*"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."* Paul wrote to Christians who rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus Christ. They turned away from idolatry and sin and looked to their Savior. They waited and longed for his return. But then mom died. Her husband died. Their child died. Their bodies were placed in the ground, or in a family tomb cut in stone, or cremated and placed in an urn. But what would happen when Jesus returned – with their bodies, with them? Was this as hopeless as the burial of an unbeliever who does not have Christ, and expects hell? What hopelessness! What uncertainty! **Paul brings them comfort at the casket.**

Paul spent only a short time in Thessalonica before he was forced by mounting persecution to go to Berea. One scholar thought only four weeks. Paul communicated with these new believers through fellow missionaries and by letter. Paul taught them about what happens to our loved ones who die in the Lord. *"For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the*

*Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”* Believers who die in the Lord are not lost. They are very much alive in heaven. Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us that the body *returns to the ground... the soul returns to God who gave it.* They await the glorious resurrection on the last day. Jesus will bring them with him when he comes back. There is no staging that will take place like waiting for relatives who are coming in on different flights and you circle the baggage claim area. You will see them again on the day Jesus returns. Jesus own words tell us this and more! *“Because I live, you also will live”* (John 14:19).

But what do you say at the casket, at the funeral? If you are frustrated with yourself for your difficulty in finding the right words, or for offering up no more than “sorry for your loss,” you are not alone. We are sinners. Our offensive sins and failures of thought, word and deed, are only symptoms of the greater problem. We were born in sin, enemies of God, stubbornly opposed to him even at our first breath. And though we have been rescued from sin, death and the devil, and even our sinful selves, our sinful nature would like us to be mute, to be silent about the one thing needful, especially at the crossroads of death. Our sinful nature would like despair, overwhelming grief, and endless tears of hopelessness to reign. You know how quickly our sinful hearts can take us to that dark place. God forgive us for our sinfulness and our weakness! And God grant us the words. God has, and God does!

Paul gives us the only answer: **Focus your eyes on Christ.** *“For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” “For 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...”* Where can you find real everlasting comfort? Christ alone. Jesus’ death and resurrection directly impact your life now and your eternity and the eternity of your loved ones!

At the visitation for my sister Erika’s funeral, my 7<sup>th</sup> grade classmate who had moved to Illinois came back for the funeral. He handed me a picture he had drawn. It was a picture of Jesus’ cross. Were we both Christians? Yes. Was there a question of where my sister was? No. But each day we need this comfort. Each day we have great need to focus on why we can have confidence and joy even through the tears. We are at the same time sinner and saint. We have constant battles in our hearts over temptation, over truth, over sin and salvation. **Focus your eyes on Christ.** Jesus Christ died for your sins to pay their penalty in full. Don’t look in. Look out and at the author and perfecter of your faith. Jesus Christ rose from the grave to prove that even your sin is forgiven, that there is a place

for you in heaven and for all who believe in Jesus as their Savior. Jesus kept his promise to rise; he'll keep his promise to return and raise your loved ones. And you won't miss it. In one beautiful moment you'll hear it all - *his voice, the loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God*. And they will all hear it too – all those who have fallen asleep/ who have died *“in the Lord,”* believing that he is their Savior.

**Rejoice in the Reunion** that is coming. As you grow older, the number of people you look forward to seeing again on the last day grows larger. You will get to see your Savior face to face. Peter tells us, *“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls”* (1 Peter 1:8,9). Who else do you look forward to seeing again, embracing, thanking, or meeting for the first time? Just take 30 seconds and think on that now. Start your list. (take 30 seconds).

*“For 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. 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. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”*

There will be no more humility for Jesus, no babe in Bethlehem action going on; he is going to come in glory. He is going to come showing his rule and reign and that he has, does, and forever will continue to control all things. The wedding banquet is set and waiting. The invitations have been sent out. The church militant changes their struggle and sin-stained uniforms for the robes of righteousness Jesus has made for them. Frail human bodies we wear are upgraded in an instant to holy, glorious and stainless bodies. Those believers whose bodies have been waiting for thousands of years, centuries, a decade, or days will rise, restored and glorified, reunited with their souls which have been in heaven. And we will all meet the Lord in the air on that great and glorious Last Day. And we will be seen for who we really are, for whom our God has made us – **Saints Triumphant**. What a reunion that will be – *“forever with the Lord!”*

**Rejoice!**

Encourage your hearts and each other with these words as you consider your own mortality, as you consider your loved ones who have died in the Lord, and as you seek to **Comfort at the casket. Focus your eyes and their eyes on Jesus. Rejoice at the reunion that awaits us**. Praise be to God. They are and we will be – *“forever with the Lord.”* Amen.