

“Hope in a World Like This”- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

When I was growing up we used to watch the television show, *The Twilight Zone*. I can remember one episode called, “A Most Unusual Camera”. A husband and a wife robbed a curio shop and one of the things they stole was a camera. This was an unusual camera in that it produced pictures from about five minutes in the future. Of course, the couple used the camera for evil means and they died because of it. People are fascinated with the future. All of us want to know what’s coming next. But we don’t need a magic camera to learn about the future. In the bible passage we just read gives us a snapshot of what is going to happen when a Christian dies and the hope that is going to happen when Jesus returns.

We are in a series of sermons looking at living an authentic life. This week we are looking at authentic hope. Authentic hope is tied in with what happens to us after we die. In the passage that was read Paul had preached in Thessalonica that Jesus was going to return soon. All who placed their faith in Jesus would be taken to be with the Lord when he returned. Everyone was excited about this until some of the believers started dying and Jesus had yet to come back. The family members scratched their heads and were asking what was going to happen to their loved ones who died before Jesus came back.

I have conducted many funerals in my time including my mother’s and each time if I know that the person was a Christian, I knew that there was hope beyond the grave. So why do we have this hope? Paul gives us four hopeful truths about what happens to a Christian when they die.

The first truth is that we can know what happens after death. Paul wrote, “We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep.” All people want to know what happens after someone dies. A little boy wrote a letter to God that said, “Dear God, what is it like after a person dies? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know, I don’t want to do it.” Your friend, Mike. Paul says we can know. Have you notice how many people don’t want to talk about death? It is the ultimate elephant in the room. Try this the next time you are with friends, “Hey, what do you think about death? Let’s talk about what happens when a person dies.” See

what kind of reaction you get. Chances are someone will change the subject quick.

It is your body that will die, but your soul and spirit will live on. The book of Ecclesiastes says God has placed eternity in our hearts, but we choose to live in the restraints of chronological time.

The second truth is that for believers, death is like falling asleep. Paul refers to death on three occasions as “falling asleep”. The Greeks and the Romans thought of the place of burial as a scary place filled with departed spirits. But the Christians were the ones that changed the idea of the grave being a scary place. They started calling the name of the graveyard to the word we use: cemetery. It is the same Greek word for army barracks. The only thing that soldiers do in a barracks is sleep. They go to sleep at the sound of Taps and wake up to the sound of reveille. The believer goes to sleep at death, but wakes up at the sound of the trumpet. That’s why the second coming of Christ has been called the “great getting-up morning.”

Winston Churchill planned his own funeral. There thousands of dignitaries packed into St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. At the end of the service, a bugler at the top of the dome played a solemn rendition of taps. But as soon as he finished, another bugler positioned on the other side of the dome played a spirited rendition of reveille. Churchill wanted people to know that he would wake up from death.

What a comfort it is that the Bible calls our death sleep? There is nothing scary about sleep. In fact, when we get tired we need to sleep. Our bodies die but we go to be with the Lord. Jesus called death sleep. In John 11 when Lazarus died and Jesus got the news he told his disciples that, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.” Jesus was referring to death. As Christians when we die we go to sleep to be awoken by God.

The third truth is that death is a safe place because Jesus has been there. All of us know the Apostle’s Creed. In the middle of this creed we often do, we see the words, “We believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead.” Our basis for

our belief about life after death is bound up in these words. Whenever there is an event where the President or Vice-President are going to attend, the Secret Service sweep the facility to make sure there is no threat to the President or Vice President. This is what Jesus has done for us in death. David wrote, "Yeah, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Jesus has already walked through the valley of the shadow of death. And he emerged on the other side alive forevermore. So even if death may seem like a dark place, and a mysterious place, it is a safe place because like the Secret Service, Jesus has swept it clean from anything scary or harmful.

The fourth truth is that a believer's grief is infused with hope. When we lose a loved one we all grieve, but Paul wrote that we don't have to "grieve like the rest of humanity who have no hope." I have conducted funerals of people I knew who were believers. The service was one of celebration of the person's life in Christ and you felt much hope. I have also conducted funerals where the family only knew the stuff of this life. They cared little for the news of the next life. It showed in their grief. There was a hardness, harshness, a hopelessness to the whole thing. Grief without hope is not pretty. But I have stood at the gravesides where there were tears of grief but they were tinted with hope. They were confident of a future reunion. Let me share three reasons why we can have hope at the graveside.

First, there is a living hope: resurrection or rapture. If you know Jesus, you will live on after death. Your loved ones in Christ are alive right now. They are with Jesus. If Jesus returns in our life time we will not have a funeral. We will be taken up by Jesus. We call this the rapture. I'm not looking for the undertaker. I'm looking for the upper-taker. We will die and be resurrected or be taken up by Jesus.

Second, there is the living hope: reunion. There will not only be resurrection or rapture, there will be reunion. Paul writes that those who are alive when Christ comes back will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air. I love the words, "together with them". Do you have loved ones in

heaven? Have you imagined what your reunion might be? Can you imagine when you get to heaven and see them running up to you. What a reunion that will be.

Third, lasting hope: relationship. Paul, "We will be with the Lord forever."

So we are called to live an authentic life with God's authentic grace, peace, love, and hope. This hope is in life we live now and in death one day we will experience. For many of us death is scary because it is an unknown. No one has come back to tell us what it is like. People know they are going to heaven but we are afraid of what death is going to be like. Many of us are scared to die. But if you know and love the Lord when our time comes to die we will be with the Lord and with those who have gone one before us.

Someone has described for me that death is when we were children and we went to sleep in the car on the way home and when we wake up it is morning and we are in our beds. Our parents had taken us in their arms and carry us to our beds. That is what death is like for the Christian. We go to sleep here and because of God's loving arms we will wake up in our heavenly home. Thanks be to God.