

# Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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November 13, 2005  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of End Time  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 52:1-6  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 84  
Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Gospel: Matthew 25:1-13

## Encourage One Another

*“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep.”* Familiar words, aren’t they? Since I have been in the ministry, those are the words I have spoken at every committal service when we have committed a body to the ground after a funeral service—words from 1 Thessalonians that have been spoken throughout the centuries, no doubt to encourage believers so that we are not ignorant (which literally means “unknowing”) so that we know what the truth is. Our God gives us these words for that very reason, so that we use them, so that we encourage one another with them, so that we don’t just encourage one another with some hollow clichés like “hang in there”, “time will heal all wounds”, “things will get better”. You and I have something more powerful to use. *“God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”* “Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on” says the Lord. *“We will be with the Lord forever.”* We have got something much more than hollow clichés to use.

So on this day, as we gather together and focus on Saints Triumphant, that God has given us the victory in Christ and that there will come a day when he takes us to the ultimate goal of that victory—life with him in heaven—we want to do what the Lord has called us to do. *“Therefore encourage each other with these words.”* That is what we are here to do today—encourage one another with these words.

As we worship together, we are not just speaking us to God and God to us. We are speaking to one another. This is what we believe about our God. This is the confidence that we have. And it centers in one truth that Paul focuses on for the Thessalonians. *“We believe that Jesus died and rose again”*. That central truth is what we encourage one another with. And then in view of Christ’s second return, when he will come and take those who believe in him to heaven, we also encourage one another with his promise. *“We will be with the Lord forever.”* These are some grand and glorious truths that our God has given us to encourage each other with.

The Thessalonians needed that encouragement. It is one of the reasons Paul wrote his first letter to them. They were kind of confused about what happens when a person dies. They were afraid that the people who died before Jesus’ second coming, which they knew about and they believed would happen, but they were afraid that those who died before that time would not be raised up at the end. There were those who had come after Paul had taught them and taught them that there is no resurrection from the death, that only those who are alive at the end will be going to be with the Lord in heaven. If you had that being told to you, do you think you would be worried? Would you be anxious? Would you be fretful? Think of the knot that would put in the pit of

your stomach if you had a loved one who had died believing in Jesus but now someone is telling you that they aren't going to be raised up at the last day or they aren't going to go to heaven right away with us who are there when Christ returns. So Paul writes to clear up some of the confusion. He says to them, "We don't want you to be ignorant. We don't want you to go around having no knowledge about those who fall asleep. Some people will try to confuse you, but here is the truth. You don't have to grieve like the rest of men." It is natural to grieve when there is a loss. God never tells us not to grieve, he just tells us not to grieve like those who have no hope. The Thessalonians and you and I have a hope that is a certain confidence. Not a wish or not a hope so, but a certain confidence. That is how the Bible uses the word "hope". This is our hope—Jesus died and rose again.

Those simple truths that you have learned since you were just coming up to your parents' knees are the truths that are essential to our encouragement when someone dies. Jesus came to this world. He didn't have to, but he did it because you and I could not come to him. You and I, stained by sin, could not bring ourselves up to God, so God had to come down to us because our sins condemn us and separate us from God. In fact, our sin leads us to focus on what we can see at times even instead of the promises God has made to us. So God comes to us. He lived perfectly in our place because you and I aren't perfect. He died in our place with all the punishment that our sins deserve heaped onto him. If that is where the story ends, we wouldn't know if that sacrifice was acceptable to God, if that sacrifice actually cleansed us from every sin. We wouldn't know if Jesus remains in the grave. Then we would be using the word "hope" in the way that we most often use it, "I hope so, but I don't know."

Here is the incredible truth. On the third day when those women went to that tomb, the stone was rolled away that they worried about, and the grave was empty—Christ had risen. Scripture tells us that he is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. Because he has risen, it assures us that those who die in him—believing that he lived and died in their place to take away their sins—they too will be raised from the dead.

Hours before Jesus was betrayed in that upper room on Maundy Thursday when a little bit later he was going to be on his knees praying, "God, if it is possible, take this cup from me", remember that night? Before he was there praying with sweat-like blood coming off his forehead, he took the time to tell the disciples this same truth. Remember he said to them, "I tell you the truth, in a little while the world will not see me any longer, but you will. Because I live, you also will live." In a little while the world wouldn't see him because he would be dead and in the grave and they wouldn't see him. But the disciples would because he would rise from the grave and appear to them over 40 days to over 500 of them to show that the sacrifice for sin was acceptable. And then he says, "Because I live, you also will live". Because he is the first fruits from the grave, we who have been baptized into his death and his resurrection, we too will rise bodily from the grave.

So our encouragement centers in this truth that Jesus died and rose again. It assures us that all of the headstones here and down the road are not the end. They are a temporary stop, but they are not the end. Because Jesus rose, we too will rise. And every time we come together to worship, isn't this what we remind each other of? We

focus on Christ's resurrection. Every week in the Prayer of the Day, right after we sing our Song or Praise, do you notice those two phrases at the end? Through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Father—every week we remind ourselves that because he lives, because he reigns, we know that we can approach the Father in prayer because the victory is ours through Christ's life and death.

We believe that, right? We weren't there. We didn't see the empty tomb. We only see it with our eyes of faith. Sometimes as we go through this life and we see the chair across from us that was always filled with a loved one, we can see that and we can focus on that and the pain is there and the grief is there and God tells us it is going to be there, but what he tells us is through that grief and through that pain, focus with the eyes of faith on the empty tomb. Then we are reminded that those who die in the Lord also will rise from the dead.

So encourage each other with the Easter victory. Encourage each other with this truth—Jesus died and rose again.

Paul then goes on to give them some of the details about what is going to happen on the last day. *The dead in Christ will rise first.* “*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.*” I have no idea what this is all going to look like—that every person that ever has lived and ever will live will be gathered together in the air some place. The one thing I do know is that when that happens and you and I are there, we are floating in the air somehow, some way, I don't know exactly how, we are not going to be looking around to say, “Hey, who is over there and who is over there?” Our eyes are all going to be on one glorious thing—that is Jesus, because we are told that he is going to return in his glory with all his angels. When Christ is there in his glory, we are not going to be looking around at each other. Every eye is going to be focused on him. That is an incredible thought—God, in his full glory, in his full love, in his full divine power, in his full divine love for us—we will see him, but not only that, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, but both those who are alive at the end and those who are dead will be with the Lord forever. “*Therefore encourage each other with these words*” he tells us. “*We will be with the Lord forever.*”

There is so much more I would like to know about what heaven is going to be like. God doesn't tell us an awful lot about it. He does tell us that simple truth which is really enough—“*we will be with the Lord forever.*” He tells us what won't be there. There'll be no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more tears. He does tell us that we will enjoy endless happiness in his presence forever. But for you and me, I guess it's enough to know “*we will be with the Lord forever.*” We will be reunited with our loved ones who died in the Lord. We will see them again. We will rejoice with them again, but even greater than that, as hard as this is for me to imagine, “*we will be with the Lord forever*” and that will be our greatest thrill.

So when does this happen that “*we will be with the Lord forever*”? Think of what we read in the “In Memoriam” on the back of the service folder there. “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” Bodily we will be with the Lord forever after Judgment Day, but those who die in the Lord are immediately with their Lord. They are blessed from that moment on. Their body might go to the ground to await the

resurrection on the Last Day, but their souls are in heaven rejoicing, enjoying perfection from that moment on. Think of what Jesus said to the thief on the cross—"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." This is God's comfort to us. Those who die in the Lord, believing that Jesus is their Savior, are with the Lord from that point on. You and I need to remind each other of this truth because as I said before, our eyes at times can only focus on what we can see. We need to build up our eyes of faith so that we focus on God's promises. How we do that is through Word and Sacrament. It is through hearing his promises, growing in those promises, reminding ourselves that we were baptized into his death and resurrection so that we are in Jesus and so that we will be with the Lord forever.

These are the glorious things that our God gives us. He gives them to us for a very definite purpose—not just so that we hoard them to ourselves or use them to comfort ourselves. But he tells us that he has a responsibility to us and we have a responsibility to him and we also have a responsibility to each other. Encourage one another with these words. Build each other up with these words because these words are the most powerful thing that you and I will ever have. Jesus died and rose again and because that took away our sins, you and I will be with the Lord forever. That is our glorious confidence.