

## Hope in Christ

### I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Sometimes, it's hard to have hope, isn't it? It's not just all the corruption and fighting in Washington that fills our TV screens. It's not just all our local problems, from failing schools to empty storefronts. Many of us are wrestling with chronic pain and sickness in ourselves or in our loved ones. Others are dealing with the finality of death, the ultimate problem without a human solution. At the graveside, there is no room for pride or confidence. When we lose the ones we love the most, it is so easy for our hope to die along with them.

I suppose that's why so many of us make a special effort to come to worship on Easter Sunday. For this is the day that we celebrate the most amazing event in all of human history – not the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin, and not the amazing miracles He did, like healing the sick and multiplying the loaves and fishes and walking on the water. No, today, we rejoice that Jesus's death on the cross wasn't the end. No, He rose from the dead, and not just as a disembodied spirit, but as a real, flesh-and-blood human being – someone His followers could recognize and take hold of. No matter what is going on in our community, no matter what is going on in our lives, because of the resurrection of Christ, we can have hope.

In today's passage, Paul deals with a particular kind of hope – the hope that those of us who grieve will see our loved ones again someday. In verse 14, Paul reminds us that, because Christ rose from the dead, He will bring all His people back to Earth with Him when He comes again. Because Christ rose from the dead, we can be certain that those who depart this life have, in a very real sense, simply fallen asleep, to wake on that great day when the trumpet of God shall sound.

But here we notice that Paul describes those who will rise again in a curious way. In verse 14, he says this good news is for those who "sleep in Jesus." And in verse 16, he says that those who will rise will be the "dead in Christ." What does this mean?

Paul is, in fact, pointing to the same amazing truth that we celebrate when we come to the Lord's Table this morning. For here we recognize that our souls do not just go to be with the Lord after we die. Here we rejoice that our bodies are not just going to be with Christ on that future day He comes again, as verse 17 says. No, as we come to this table, and as we take this bread and this fruit of the vine inside us, we are saying something that really cannot be expressed in words – that somehow Christ is not just with us but within us, that His Holy Spirit has made His home in our hearts even now, today, on this side of the grave, on this side of Heaven.

And how does one come to participate in this amazing truth? How does one come to be in Christ, and to have Christ come to live in us? It's not because we eat this bread and drink this cup – there's no magic inside these elements themselves. Instead, Paul gives us a hint in verse 14, a hint that he spells out so much more clearly in the letter to the Romans we have just finished studying – this intimate, saving relationship to Christ is for those who believe. It is our faith in Christ that allows us to draw close to Him in communion. It is our faith in Christ that makes His spiritual presence in these elements real to us.

But what exactly does it mean to believe, to have faith, to trust in Christ? Paul points to one essential element of this faith in chapter 5, verse 10, where he reminds us that Christ died for us. And in the previous verse, Paul reminds us that Christ died to save us from wrath.

And that's another part of the good news we celebrate during this season. For the truth is that even though we are the ones who have sinned against God, pulling away from Him and from others into ourselves, breaking His perfect law of love, Christ is the One Who has paid the death penalty on behalf of all who trust in Him, dying so that all His people might be forgiven. It is only when we admit our helplessness to pay this debt, trusting Jesus to die in our place and to earn for us the righteousness we can not earn for ourselves, it is only then that we can truly say we trust in Christ, that we believe in Jesus.

And that is why this table is not just for members of this congregation. It's not just for Presbyterians. No, everyone is welcome here who truly trusts in Christ as their Savior, everyone who has made a public profession of that faith, regardless of what congregation or denomination they might have joined. This is the Lord's table, and all those who trust in Christ are welcome here.

And if we are trusting in Christ in this way, that means that all the good news Paul describes in this passage is in fact for us. It means we can have hope not only that we will see our loved ones on the day when He comes again. It means we have hope not only that we will meet Him in the air, accompanying Him as He returns to earth to establish His Kingdom here, to make all things new and to set all things right.

No, if we are trusting in Christ as Savior today, that also means we have recognized Him to be who Paul says He is today – the Lord. For if He has the authority to command the trumpet of God to sound at the end of time, if He has the authority to command the archangels, along with all the armies of Heaven to accompany Him to earth on the great Day of Judgment, that proves He already has all that authority today, not only in Heaven, but here on earth.

And how did Jesus earn such tremendous authority? By completely surrendering Himself to the will of the Father, by dying on the cross so that a world full of sinners might be forgiven. That's what we remember when we come to this table – we proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord. So when we come to the table we are not only trusting Jesus to save us from our sins. We are also bowing the knee to Him as Lord, accepting His gracious pardon, and pledging our allegiance to Him as our King.

So, let's look again at all those impossible problems that face us today, from politics to poverty, from sickness to death. Could any of those things be too difficult for the One Who rose from the dead? Do any of those things fall outside the jurisdiction of King Jesus, the One to whom all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given? And if Jesus loved us enough to die for us, can we doubt that He will indeed use all that authority for good, to work out His perfect will for us and for our loved ones, no matter what the circumstances of our lives may be?

Do you need some hope today? Look at the cross, and remember God's great love for you. Look at the empty tomb, and remember God's power to save you. Trust that you have an Almighty King in Heaven who has promised to protect you today and to come again one day to make all things right. And come to the table to receive the sign and the seal of God's love, God's power, and God's presence within you today.