

## ENDURING HOPE

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 14:1-7

November 4, 2018

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

On this All Saints Day Sunday, we remember those who have finished the race of faith and have claimed the victory prize of eternal life. What we see only dimly they see clearly – what we only know in part, they know fully (1Cor. 13:12). This day is meant to be a day of celebration, and yet our celebration may well be mixed with a few tears and even what might be described as the heaviness of grief. The Apostle Paul refers to death as “the last enemy.” (1 Cor. 15:26) And when that enemy touches our life – snatches from our sight and touch those whom we love – the result is grief – grief is simply and yet profoundly the natural human response to loss.

Psychologists refer to the process of grief as “grief work.” And that’s how it often feels. It’s hard, sometimes agonizing work. And it isn’t just in the days that immediately follow death. Grief often goes on. I wouldn’t be surprised if on any given Sunday many of you find yourselves thinking of someone now gone, and yet someone you continue to carry in your heart. And that’s because grief keeps coming back, sometimes unexpectedly, grabbing us from behind, and pulling us into a sudden sense of loss and therefore, sadness. But Paul also says, we do not grieve as those “who have no hope.” (1 Thess. 4:13) As Christians, it is our hope that causes us to grieve differently.

Hope of what? We hope that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, will raise us as well. We hope that just as Christ ventured forth from the realm of death into life, so shall he take us along with him. We believe Jesus’ words when he said, “I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26) Our hope is far from unfounded; it is far from wishful thinking. Our hope is based not only upon what we know historically of Jesus, it’s based upon our personal experiences of the living Christ in our lives now. In Romans 8, Paul says, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

If our knowledge of and experience with Christ has taught us one thing, it is that God longs to be with us, and will do almost anything to be near us. In fact, God has shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that going to the most extreme of lengths is exactly what God is willing to do to have us close to Him.

This is the story that we recite and celebrate every Sunday here in this sanctuary. In the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets, the psalms, in Jesus’ birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection, God sought us; in fact, came to us. When Jesus was resurrected, what did he do, first thing after he was raised? He came back to us, to his disciples who had denied and betrayed and ran away from him. In this action we find such great hope. For we are confident that the God who has gone to such extraordinary lengths to prove to us the extent of his love, will not cease to extend that love to us in death.

We believe that the same God who pursued us, and reached out to us, and sought us all the days of our lives will draw us to himself in death. Our hope is not the expectation of some eternal spark that just goes on and on like reincarnation. It’s

not the assumption that we have within ourselves the ability to somehow be immortal. Our hope is that the love of God is stronger than the power and devastation of death, and ultimately, nothing will separate us from that love. We believe that the God who has gone to such great lengths to save us and claim us in life, will continue to demand us even in death. That is why we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

Over the years, I've heard and read how the presence of methane gas has and always will be a dangerous concern in coalmines. In today's age, technology helps monitor methane levels and better circulates fresh air to keep methane levels below explosive levels. However, in the past it was always the job of a single miner to descend alone to the tunnels of the coal mine to check for methane gas before the rest of the miners went down to the mines for the day. That single miner would take with him a safety light, and he would check out each of the tunnels and shafts of the mine to make sure there was no high concentration of methane gas present. If the light of the safety lamp so much as flickered, he knew that he might have to run for his life. After checking the mine, that lone miner would then rise up to the surface where all the other miners would be gathered around expectantly waiting for him to announce, "It's safe; you can go down into the mine."

As Christians, we know that is what Jesus has done for us. Coming up out of the depths of death, he has announced to all who are gathered here in this life on earth: "It's safe now! You can enter into death, into the darkness and the unknown. It's okay because I have been there and checked it out. It has not been victorious over me. In fact, I have overcome it, and I will be with you in death that you may overcome it as well." It is because death, that final enemy, has been defeated that we now possess an enduring, eternal hope.

Jesus assured his followers that "because I live, you also will live." (John 14:19) That is why on a day like this we not only remember those who have died and feel the grief of their absence, we also celebrate their glorious achievement of eternal life. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died" (1 Thess. 4:14). What God did for Jesus, God extends to us as we are invited to enter into and to be a part of God's great triumph over the final enemy of death. Death did not have the last word over Jesus and neither will it have the last word over us.

Today, Jesus comes to us; he is present with us in Word and Sacrament, and he reassures us that we can count on his presence being with us forever. Actually, today and every Sunday is a bit like a dress rehearsal for heaven. Think of our experiences of worship as our way of showing our love for Jesus now, so that we will be ready to love him for all eternity; consider our weekly engagement in praise and adoration now as a way of being prepared to praise God for all eternity; consider our participation in Holy Communion now as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits us.

As we remember the faithful who have passed from our sight into the glory of eternity, may we each be filled this day with enduring hope – a hope that is based on the One who conquered death! Know this day that the living Christ is with us, inviting us, the saints on earth, to join our hearts and voices with the saints in heaven. With them, we remember his sacrifice and we celebrate his victory over death as we share in Holy Communion. Here in this church, we practice open Communion, which means that all are invited to eat and to drink and to know Christ's presence among us. Let us prepare ourselves by first entering into a time of confession...