

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

## ASLEEP IN JESUS

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Marlene Dannhoff Funeral  
St. John, South Branch; December 16, 2019

The end of Marlene's life on this earth, though we all knew it was coming, came quicker than expected. Her body was failing, and it looked like when she went to bed on Sunday night that her vital signs were stable, but in the very early hours of the morning Jesus called her to be with Him in heaven. It went very quickly in the end, but it was a very long dying at the same time.

When God brought Marlene and Clarence together as husband and wife, He did it for better and for worse. For better was their life together raising their children in the Christian faith, and the for worse in the death of a daughter. For better was their many years of marriage together, and the for worse Marlene's declining health and ability due to the dementia she suffered. Throughout their life together, Clarence was by her side. When she could not care for herself any longer, he cared for her at home longer than anyone thought possible, and was by her side throughout her time in the nursing home.

Farther back than I can recall, I remember my mother by my bedside at night praying with me as a small child: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus' sake." Marlene's body fell asleep in Jesus Monday early. Yet her soul lives with Him in heaven, waiting for the Lord's glorious return on the Last Day to wake her body from the sleep of death and reunite her soul with her risen and glorious body to live forever. She kept her faith in God in the face of long and difficult struggles in her body. She could say with the long-suffering Job:

**For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the last He will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see for myself,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
My heart faints within me!**

It is only because our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, died and rose for us that we can have this hope. Like Marlene's, Jesus' death was no surprise; it had been prophesied since the Fall into sin, and Jesus Himself had come right out and told His disciples where and when He would die on the cross. The death of God's Son on the cross should not have been a surprise to anyone who had been paying attention, yet it came quickly at the end. When Pontius Pilate, who had sentenced Jesus to die earlier in the morning, was asked for His body to be taken down later that same afternoon, he was surprised that Jesus' death had come so quickly. Then Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus hastily took down Jesus' body down and laid it to rest in the tomb.

The bigger surprise for many was Jesus' resurrection on the third day, though that should not have been a surprise either since Jesus had just as clearly declared He would rise from the dead, as prophesied by God. His body did not sleep long in the grave, and His resurrection gives hope to us and all who believe in Him, even as we grieve and must lay to rest the bodies of our loved ones in their graves, knowing that we will all follow them one day – unless Jesus returns first.

This is our faith and hope, as St. Paul wrote in First Thessalonians four: **But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.** St. Paul uses the term “sleep” to describe for Christians the death of the human body. In this, he uses the same terminology that Jesus used.

You probably remember the Gospel story of a man named Jairus, whose twelve-year-old daughter was near death, so he came to Jesus to save her life. But when Jesus got to the home, the daughter had already died, and the mourners told Jairus to send Jesus away because it was too late. Jesus told them that she was not dead, but sleeping, and they mocked Jesus for saying something so ridiculous. The little girl was in fact dead, but she would not be dead for long because physical death is but sleep to Jesus and He can wake the dead and give them life again, which he did for that little girl. He went to her death-bed, took her by the hand and said, **“Child, arise.”** And her spirit returned to her body and she came back to life (Lk 8:40-42, 49-56).

That was Marlene's faith since she was a little girl. And as a little girl, her goal was to become a Lutheran school teacher. Lutheran schools are famous for give a good education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also in teaching God's Word to the children. Marlene was able to do that right out of high school in the Lutheran schools in Antrim and here in South Branch. Not much more than a girl herself, she could teach those stories of Jesus' saving work, dying and rising for us sinners to forgive us and promise us eternal life in Him.

Like many other Christians who suffer with dementia, Marlene gradually lost the ability to confess out loud her faith in Jesus. But this does not mean that she lost her faith! The same faith that God gave her as an infant at her Baptism, which she could not put into words until she was older, God kept her in until she died. She has fallen asleep in Jesus, in faith in Jesus, and when He comes on the Last day, He will take her by the hand and awake her body from its sleep and give it back her spirit to live forever in body and soul.

St. Paul says in our text that we should **comfort one another with these words**. Sin, death, and the devil are our enemies, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death, but thanks be to God because He has given us the victory over all our enemies in Christ Jesus, who died and rose for us! Like the mourners who laughed at Jesus who said the little girl was not dead, but sleeping, the world around us more and more these days thinks we are fools to gather in a church on this cold winter day with hope in Jesus Christ, hope that comforts us, the hope that we use to comfort each other.

At the end of the Service, we will go out to the cemetery to lay Marlene's body to rest. (Clarence asked that we do some of the committal service inside because of the cold, so the time at the graveside in the cemetery will be brief.) The word "cemetery" is actually a Christian term, which means place of "rest" or "sleep" and reflects our belief in the resurrection. Unbelievers have "grave yards" where their bodies lie without hope. But Christians have cemeteries, where our bodies and the bodies of our loved one who died in the faith rest in sleep until Jesus comes to raise us.

*Asleep in Jesus! Peaceful rest, Whose waking is supremely blest;  
No fear, no woe, shall dim that hour That manifests the Savior's pow'r.*  
Amen.

(TLH 587.3)