

THOUGH HE DIED, YET SHALL HE LIVE

John 11:17-27; Ps. 72:6; Maurice Theobald Funeral; May 17, 2021

When meeting with family gathered at “Blackie’s” home several hours after his death, I think it was Barb who suggested that I mention something today about his love of mowing grass. My first reaction to that was thinking about the familiar verses in the Bible that talk about grass. For example, when Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount telling us to not worry but trust in God’s care for us, He said, **“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”** (Mt 6:30). Another familiar Old Testament illustration of grass is pure law. **“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass”** (Is. 40:6b-7). That Word of God does not conger up images of Maurice contentedly mowing the lawn or taking his grandkids for rides over the freshly mown grass. So I thought I better go in a different direction in this sermon today.

What do grieving family and friends need to hear at a time like this? Not that God will burn up their loved one like dried grass! Those who live in this world and then die in the Christian faith trust that they are not condemned, but saved by Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. On the other hand, God’s Word is clear that those without Christian faith will face the fires of hell; they have been warned that they should repent of their sins and come now in faith before God to receive the forgiveness of their sins, life, and salvation for Jesus’ sake. Those who die without Christian faith, though they might reject God’s wrath and hell as quaint old myths that can be ignored, will stand before the God they denied in this life and receive His eternal condemnation.

What we need to hear today from God’s Word is that God’s righteous judgment against us because of our sin has been dealt with by Jesus Christ. What we need to hear today is that, even though “Blackie” has died and his remains will be laid to rest in the ground a little later on, even though he died because he was born and lived as a sinner, his sins were washed away by God in his Baptism into Christ and that Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament forgave his sin.

And because of this, I chose the hopeful words from our Gospel Reading for today from John 11, the account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus. The dead man's sister, Martha, had this conversation with Jesus several days after Lazarus' death and when Jesus had finally arrived. **“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You.”** Jesus said to her, **“Your brother will rise again.”** Martha said to Him, **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”** Jesus said to her, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.”**

How does this bear on the life and death of Maurice? Like with Lazarus, Jesus did not come to his home before he died and heal him so he would keep living. Why God chooses to heal and save some from physical death and let others suffer and die is hidden in the mind of God and cannot be answered by us. The prayer of Christians is that God would come and save us and our loved ones, but that prayer often seems to go unanswered by God.

When that happens we, like Martha, must keep our faith in God that there is a resurrection from the dead on the Last Day. When Jesus returns visibly in glory on the Last Day, He will raise all the dead and give eternal life in heaven to all believers in Christ. That's what we said we believe when we confessed in the Apostles' Creed, **“I believe in... the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”**

But unlike Martha, who had this faith before Jesus died on the cross and rose on the third day, Jesus has already risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, the source of our faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting for us. Our hope today is based on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and then ascended into heaven showing us the way and leading us on the way to eternal life. I can confidently say of Maurice what Martha said about her brother. **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”** This is our Christian faith. Even though all we have with us today is “Blackie's” dead body, our confident hope is that it will rise to live again with his soul.

Yet his dead body seems to contradict what Jesus said next to Martha. **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.”** How can Jesus say that, **“though we die... everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die”**? It sounds like Jesus is talking out of both sides of His mouth. How can we die and never die?

Unless Jesus returns in glory on the Last Day before the rest of us physically die, we are all going to die and be buried. But a cemetery full of Christians is not a field of bones that will stay there forever, but like seeds planted in the ground waiting for the spring rains to cause those seeds to sprout and grow. Jesus’ body was the first seed to be planted in the ground in death that sprouted to live and grow to bear much fruit to raise us to eternal life.

We will see an illustration of this as we drive out to the cemetery in a little while. The bare fields of the winter have been planted with corn seed that is breaking through the soil in neat rows promising a harvest in the fall. The bodies of Christians planted in the cemetery are like those seeds. Jesus will raise us and bring us to a fullness of life that we have not yet experienced.

Jesus’ promise that Christians **“shall never die”** is not a denial of physical death, but the promise that our bodies will not be dead forever. Jesus’ promise to Maurice is, **“Though he died, yet shall he live.”**

On the Day God raises the dead He will also recreate and restore this world to the perfection He intended at the beginning, before sin defiled and destroyed it. What we often think of as heaven, as a spiritual place for the souls of the God’s people, will not always be only spiritual. God has promised a new heavens and a new earth as the physical home of His people where we will live forever with God, like the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. That means that there will be green grass growing in the new creation, grass that will need mowing... which brings us back to “Blackie.” Psalm 72 describes what the rule of God’s King, Jesus, will be like in the new creation. **“May He be like rain that falls on the mown grass”** (72:6). God’s going to need someone to mow that grass. In the name of Jesus, Amen!