

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

LIFE FOREVER

John 5:24-26; Avis Wagner Funeral; June 4, 2025

P Alleluia! Christ is risen!

C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Why are there funerals? The obvious answer is because someone has died. Avis has died, and we are gathered here for her funeral service. What happens at a funeral? That's not so obvious. Lots of different things happen at funerals depending on what the focus of the service is. All religions and cultures have rites of passage when someone dies, and their focuses reflect what the people believe.

Basically, there are two perspectives on the purpose of funerals (or whatever people call these gatherings). One focuses on the individual: whatever good he or she has done in life, a service of remembrance honoring him or her and celebrating that person's life, which is now over. The other is Christian. It focuses on God's salvation in Jesus Christ and the hope of life forever through faith in Him. This can include remembering the good this departed Christian was able to do throughout life because of true faith. We are here for Avis's funeral.

Physically and mentally Avis had been declining for years, but she entered a rapid decline the last few months, culminating in her broken shoulder a few days before her death. When that happened, it was clear that her life on this earth was not going to last much longer, though her death came quicker than I expected. Realize, though, that her time of dying had much in common with her time of living. What do I mean?

In life, Avis heard and believed God's Word. She faithfully attended services and received the Lord's Supper of her Savior's body and blood. She loved attending Bible Class. She and Harold supported the Good News of Jesus that was spread throughout the United States and world through Lutheran Hour Ministries. When I visited her the day before she died, she was in pain from her injury and struggled to put together two words coherently, but she was able to pray some the Lord's Prayer with me. Life was a struggle, and though hard for her to still express clearly, her faith remained strong.

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

Barb was with Avis the next day to comfort her with her presence but, especially, with God's Word. Barb read her the 23rd Psalm, which begins, **"The Lord is my Shepherd."** It ends, **"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."** As Barb ended the psalm, having heard God's Word, Avis peacefully breathed her last and was gathered into the arms of her loving Shepherd in heaven.

Some funeral services are hard to plan. Not this one! Avis picked out the hymns she wanted sung as well as the Scripture from John five. She wanted verse 24 as part of her funeral service – as noted in the bulletin. I added verses 25-26.

[Jesus said:] **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself"** (John 5:24-26).

I don't know why Avis wanted this verse for her funeral, but she made a good choice. I think it is safe to assume that she wanted to express her faith in Jesus and what He had done for her and all who believe in Him. This Scripture is full of hope and comfort, especially for those who are grieving a death. It does not gloss over or deny the effects of death but faces them. This Scripture is full of promise for those who believe in Jesus, who has overcome our sin and deaths by His death and brings life forever by rising to life again. It gives us hope and comfort by faith in Jesus, the hope and comfort Avis had both in life and death based on God's promises to her.

Avis's chosen verse: **Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life.**

Jesus repeats for emphasis **"truly,"** the Hebrew word **"amen,"** which has the sense of "truth, truly, and assuredly." It is a word of faith we use to put our "yes!" to God's promises. We add our trusting, believing "amen" because Jesus' Word is trustworthy and true.

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

Jesus said: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My Word.”** Avis loved to hear and learn God’s Word. When she could no longer get herself to church and Bible class, she relied on church friends to pick her up and get her here. The last time she was in church – January 26th I think – she knelt there at the Communion rail and received Jesus’ body and blood for the forgiveness of her sins, but she was too weak to stand up and was taken to the ER for evaluation. Though she was not able to get to church and Bible class, she attended the monthly service at Ingleside for a while and received the Lord’s Supper in her room. The last thing Avis heard in this world was Jesus’ comforting Word, promising that she would **dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

“Whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me.” Hearing God’s Word and believing are inseparable. The Holy Spirit works faith in us through hearing the Word of Christ. Hearing God’s Word brings us to faith in God the Father who sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive all our sins and save us by His death resurrection. Avis wanted you to hear and believe this Word of God today.

“Whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life.” Avis believed that she had life forever by hearing this Word and having faith in God. She believed that, even though she would die, she would live forever. Heaven was not just a possibility for her but a certainty. Because her Shepherd had passed through the valley of the shadow of death to live forever, she would do the same. Spiritually, this life was hers on earth and she enjoys life in her soul now in heaven, but there is more to life forever that is to come.

Jesus goes on with another double “amen” promise: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself.”** Jesus promises a physical resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The last words Avis heard in her earthly life were: **I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.** Her broken body will be raised from the dead to be glorious like that of her Savior Jesus Christ.

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Avis chose John 5:24 for her funeral. She wanted you to hear and believe this comforting Word of God. I chose the other readings from Daniel, Revelation, and Matthew. You might think them a little strange and wonder why I chose them. They are texts for the feast of St. Michael and All Angels, which is commemorated by the Church on September 29th. Does that date, September 29th, ring a bell? It was the date of Avis's birth into this world.

Whenever I would bring up St. Michael and All Angels in a Bible Class, or the festival would fall on a Sunday and we would commemorate it in church, with a twinkle in her eye Avis would remind me that it was also her birthday. This happened often enough so that I will always associate them.

When Michael the archangel led the heavenly host against Satan's hoards and cast them out of God's presence, it was a sign that the devil has no power over those who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Avis, whose **"angels always see the face of [Jesus'] Father who is in heaven,"** is now gathered with that angelic heavenly host until that great day when Christ returns in glory.

Daniel prophesied that those who are God's own **"shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake [rise from the dead in their bodies], some [true believers in God] to everlasting life, and some [unbelievers] to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise [like Avis] shall shine like the brightness of the sky above... like the stars forever and ever."**

Avis has life forever with Jesus, her Good Shepherd. Amen.