

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
REV. JOHN BURTON
JUNE 26, 2011 – SERMON LOTTERY

SERMON: “WILL THE DEAD IN CHRIST WILL RISE FIRST?”
TEXT: I THESSALONIANS 4: 13-16

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so 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 died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

This is Audrey Brook's sermon. Audrey asked me to reconcile the scripture which we just heard with the often invoked statement, by well-meaning preachers and others, that the deceased are “with Christ,” as in already with Christ in Heaven.

Let me begin by saying that this is exactly what I hope for when I do the Summer Sermon Lottery: that people who are wrestling with questions or issues will put those on the table. So Audrey – thank you!

At the heart of this question is another, deeper question: what will happen to me when I die? Will I immediately open my eyes at the Pearly Gates and walk into Heaven and be surrounded by my family and friends who have been waiting for me? Or will I stay in the grave or in an urn or wherever people may have scattered my ashes until Judgment Day when all the dead will answer the call of Gabriel's trumpet?

My good friend David Cartwright suggested that I pass out paper cups and ask if anyone is thirsty. And to all who are then I should give each one a well frozen ice cube. Translation – for David this scripture is simply about delayed gratification vs. instant gratification. He really warmed up to the scripture and you might hear it from his pulpit some Sunday soon, if you're intrigued by that interpretation or just don't like mine!

I'm going a different way.

First, let me suggest we think about resurrection.

Resurrection is the raising of a human being after death. A lot of theological conflict arises when people start to talk about exactly what is raised? Does resurrection mean the raising and reassembling of a physical body – exactly like what we have now? Or with “improvements”? Does it mean the raising of a spiritual essence without a physical body? Does the soul raise without a body?

Fortunately that is not my topic today! For which I am really happy! Theologians have had as much trouble with that one as politicians have with balancing the budget! There is just no easy answer! Preaching on that is much like trying to empty a flooded basement with a shovel. You do a lot of work and don't see much progress.

Well, the concept of resurrection has an interesting history. Did you know that in the early Old Testament there is a noticeable absence of the concept of resurrection? Adam and Eve had no concept of dying and going to be with God. Same for all the people in Genesis. Apparently they thought that dead was dead, end of story.

The image of resurrection appears in the Old Testament before the actual promise of resurrection. Ezekiel 37 talks about dead bodies being reanimated but Ezekiel was clearly talking about putting “new life” back in the people of Israel – not into real corpses. So there was the image of resurrection but nothing that people thought was in God's plan for them.

And in Isaiah 26: 19 it says “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” That sounds like resurrection but when you read it in context it turns out to be a discussion of Israel's present time and an exhortation to live in the spirit of the Lord. Again, the concept arises but it is not incorporated into their faith as either a possibility for the good or a promise to the faithful.

This changed “in between the OT and NT.” By the time of Jesus the concept of resurrection had begun to take root. While the Sadducees firmly opposed any notion of resurrection, the Pharisees believed in it, but only for the ultra righteous, mostly limited to Pharisees. Heaven was reserved for those people who acted perfectly righteous.

On the other hand, Jesus not only preached resurrection but he promised it to all who believed in him and he died on the cross and rose from the tomb to make it possible.

In a special case he resurrected Lazarus from the dead but, presumably, only for him to die again, for he resurrected him into an earthly body on this earthly plane. Jesus never suggested that Lazarus was immortal – only that he had escaped death for the moment.

Eventually Rabbinic Judaism accepted the concept of resurrection but then, as now, it was clear that resurrection would not happen until the Day of Judgment which shall only occur on a perfected earth. That vision is a lot different than in the Book of Revelation!

When it comes to Epistle writers Paul had the most to say about resurrection but allow me to skip Paul for a moment. I'll be coming right back!

Two great early Christian leaders, Origen and Augustine adamantly disagreed about resurrection. Origen preached an immediate resurrection while Augustine preached that resurrection would only come at the Second Coming, when all the faithful will be resurrected -- the living would be transformed but the dead would find their souls "re clothed." So there was not agreement even among early leaders of the Church.

Ok, now we're ready to come back to Paul.

Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica. In chapter 4 verse 16 he says, "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first."

Sounds pretty straightforward. At the end, God will come and the dead in Christ will rise first and then the earthly Christians will come to meet God.

So I guess all those times I told a grieving family member that their loved one was "with God in heaven, enjoying the rewards of his/her faith" I was wrong. God only knows how many people I have confused over 31 years of ministry?!

But...Paul also says something that seems to be, well, let me read you what he says in I Thessalonians 3: 13. For clarity I'm reading from the Contemporary English Version of the Bible. "And when the Lord comes with all his people, I pray that he will make your hearts pure and innocent in the sight of God the Father."

When the Lord comes “with all his people.” Who was he talking about? Angels? No, Paul would have said “angels.” Who then if not all the faithful who had already risen in Christ?

If that is not enough, let us go back to our text and look at chapter 4 verse 14 where Paul says, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

This is a part of Paul’s discussion of Jesus second coming. So...in that second coming Jesus will “bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

“Fallen asleep” is a gentle translation of the Greek word that means “died.”

So when he comes back Jesus will bring with him those who have already died.”

How can Paul do this? How can he say two things so opposite? Paul is a very clever theologian and not want to stumble like this – so what’s going on here?

Well, this is a great moment to remind you that when you study scripture you can’t just focus on one verse. You have to get the bigger picture and see how that verse fits in the bigger picture. In this case that means considering to whom Paul was writing and why?

Guess what? I’m prepared to answer!

Paul was writing to a church (In Thessalonica) who was wrestling with death. They had always supposed that Jesus would come back before any of them died. Now members had died – did this mean they had not been good faithful Christians? They wanted to know what would happen to their souls. Would those who died before the second coming miss out on the great reward?

Here Paul is clearly addressing their concerns and giving them comforts. He reminds them that they do not grieve as others who have no hope – since they have Jesus. And he tells them that Jesus will bring with him to Great Judgment all those who have already died, their dear Thessalonian friends and others! And he tells them that not only will their deceased brothers and sisters get their salvation but they will go ahead of all the Christians who are living at that time! That’s as comforting as Paul ever gets!

If you read this passage understanding the Thessalonians concerns then you can see what Paul was saying.

Still, the question remains, when a person dies – does he or she go straight to God and live immediately in Paradise or wait until God calls all people to rise?

Sadly, I don't have a clear answer to your question. Augustine and his followers say we wait for Judgment Day. Origen and his followers say up we go. Catholics believe in limbo.

And me, I say...from my point of view I'm not sure it matters.

My personal believe has always been that dying is something like sleeping, except without tossing and turning, getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and looking at the clock to see how much longer you have before your alarm clock is going to ring you awake.

I mean, I think that dying is like closing your eyes at night an awakening to a glorious new morning without any sensation of time's passing.

Sometimes I wake up and I wonder, what times is it. I glance at the window to see how much light is coming in and then I wonder if the grey light is due to cloubs or because it is still very early, and then, if I'm really concerned I will look at Phyllis' alarm clock. But without those indications I have no idea how long I slept.

In fact, I had to do one of those darned sleep studies this past week. They wired me up. I had a ponytail of wires coming off my head! And then...I couldn't go to sleep. The more I couldn't sleep them more I got irritated. I laid there for hours, grumbling and wondering if I was going to have to pay for the sleep study if I did not sleep! Finally the staff came in and told me I could get up and get dressed. I lamented to them that I had not slept. The lady told me that I hadn't slept a wink until 2 o'clock and then I slept like a baby for the next four hours. I slept and I never knew it!

Audrey, I don't think any of us will ever know how long we sleep between this life and awakening in Heaven. A nanosecond or a thousand years will be all the same to us. We will simply wake to glory and be glad!

Believing that...I'm not going to worry about the details. And I hope you won't either - as long as you know where you are going to wake up!