

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Resurrection Makes a Difference

Let's contrast two moments in the life of Mary of Magdala. Once upon a time, Mary Magdalene had no joy—possessed by seven demons—and no hope. But then she met Jesus. He set her free. He gave her her life back. Every time she looked at Jesus, she saw everything that he had given back to her. So you can imagine how she felt when she saw him dangling from a cross, chest heaving, and then motionless. A Roman soldier speared him through the chest, just to be sure. Jesus died. And something inside of Mary died with him. This empty moment, this is the first moment we're going to contrast. What is going on in Mary's heart?

On Sunday morning, she went to his tomb to anoint his body—a final

thank-you for everything he had been for her. But, when she got there, the body was missing. Through tears, she says to the man nearby, “Where have you put him? I’ll go get him.” In the fog of grief, she thinks she’ll be able to heave the dead weight of a full-grown man. That wouldn’t be necessary. He said one word: “Mary.” And she knew it was him. She clung to Jesus—HER Jesus—desperate to never let go again. And something inside of Mary came back alive. This is the second moment, full of hope. What’s going on in Mary’s heart? What changed? It’s hard to put into words. Her friend is back, but it’s more than that. Her hope is back. Her life has been re-made because Jesus is not dead. Jesus—HER Jesus—is alive.

That is the theme of Saint’s Triumphant:

We Believe that Jesus Died and Rose.

That made all the difference for Mary Magdalene.

Thessalonians Needed the Resurrection

That is precisely what the Christians in the ancient city of Thessalonica needed to know. Their pastor wrote to them, “**Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed.**” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) These people needed to know what Mary knew. They knew that Jesus was alive, but they didn’t appreciate what that meant.

We Need the Resurrection

I wonder if you and I don’t have a similar problem. Jesus died on the cross, of course. He rose again from the dead on Easter Sunday, of course. But sometimes, the implications of what that means can slip from the forefront of our minds, which is a significant problem when we have moments of emptiness like Mary. For some of you, the emptiness comes when you stand, like Mary, at the grave of someone who was your very life. In a few minutes, we’ll read the names of the Mount Olive loved ones who are no

longer with us. For others, the emptiness creeps in at the threat of death. The accident, the diagnosis, the surgery, the complication. And for all of us, there is the haunting truth that end is a day closer. And what's worse—we are all viscerally aware that we bear some responsibility for this emptiness. It's our fault. Not directly, as if you did something to hurt or kill, but you know that pain comes from sin, and sin comes from me. That's what it means to have a conscience. We have moments like Mary. In those moments, we grieve. When we think about our dearly departed, we grieve— but Christian grief is different.

Saints Triumphant

“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Something happened to Mary that restored her hope. She held onto her Jesus. And today that's what we're going to do too. We grieve while holding onto Jesus. **“For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” (1 Thessalonians 4:14)**

Mary's emptiness transformed into joy because Jesus wasn't dead—he was alive. And that's true of your emptiness too. You see, it's not just Jesus who will rise from the dead. We believe that God will bring with Jesus all those who have fallen asleep in him. As easy as waking up from a nap, that's how simply Jesus will bring back you, and me, and all those we love.

With Those Who Have Fallen Asleep in Him

Here's how it will happen:

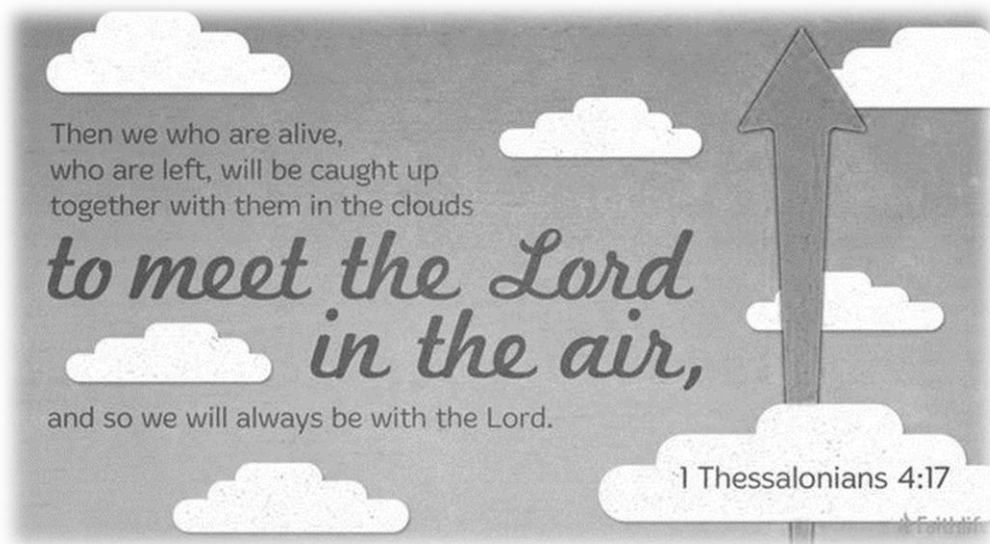
“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-16)



What a day! Can you call to mind the person you're missing in your empty moments? What do you remember about them? My dad lost his grandfather 30 years ago. My dad told me that not a day goes by that I don't think of him. And I don't even remember my great grandpa Krizenesky. Here's the great promise—the reunion is coming. Your eyes, made perfect, will meet their eyes, made perfect. When Jesus lets out his shout, you and your loved ones, and me and Grandpa Krizenesky, we will all stand together on this earth. That is the triumph of the saints—it is the final victory over everything, including death. That triumph has been called the crown jewel of Christianity—the resurrection of the body. That's what fills empty hearts.

With the Lord Forever

And yet, it gets better. After our eyes meet, and after you've introduced me to your grandpa, your mother, your husband that I never met, as Saint Paul says,



As excited as I am to meet you in glory and your loved ones and Noah and Moses, none of us will be able to peel our eyes from the Lord Jesus. At that moment, our eyes will see what Mary saw on Easter morning—we'll see our Savior.

What Heaven is Like

Of all the great Bible teachings, this is maybe the most commonly misunderstood. What will it be like to be with the Lord forever? It's not a cartoon cloud with a harp. It's not an eternal church service with extra choir practice. It is being with the one who made everything you love. Who is the funniest person you've ever known? Well, the Lord Jesus gave that person their wit, and I guarantee you he is more entertaining. What's the best song you've ever heard? The Lord Jesus created the mind that wrote it, and I guarantee he's got more where that came from. What's the best meal you've ever had? The Lord Jesus provided that, and he is right now setting your place at a heavenly banquet that will never end. When the Bible tries to capture heaven for human minds, it describes terrific people, music, and food. And at the center of it all is the source of every good thing.

That is the triumph of the saints. That is why Mary was clinging to Jesus. Will you? There are still lots of moments of emptiness here on this earth. There are always positive COVID tests. There are still surgeries. There is still guilt. And there are still funerals. There is still grieving. But while you experience those moments of emptiness, you also **"believe that Jesus died and rose. And we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."** (1 Thessalonians 4:14) That mixes good sugar in with the bitterness.

Encourage One Another

Of course, maybe you're not experiencing a lot of emptiness right now. In that case, you've got a job to do. St. Paul closes his paragraph by saying, **"Encourage one another with these words."** (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

"Encourage" is the right word. If you break it down, the term means you put courage in. When the little t-ball player is scared to step to the plate, the coach puts some courage into him. "You can do it!" So that little boy is brave enough to step up and give it a try.

Mary didn't need the courage to swing a baseball bat. She needed the

courage to live. And Jesus encouraged her. How? By showing her that he was alive. And she clung to him. Bliss Perry once said, "Easter, like all deep things, begins in a mystery, and it ends, like all high things, in great courage."

Would you keep your eyes peeled for moments of emptiness in others? In your family, who needs courage. After church in the atrium, among your friends, who could use a bit of bravery?

When you find them, the Bible tells you exactly how to fill them up.

"Encourage one another with *these words*." (1 Thessalonians 4:18) Saying to someone, "My condolences," is an encouragement. It instills bravery to know that others are bearing your pain along with you. But you can say more. Saying, "Your loved one is in heaven," is an encouragement.

Knowing that the dead in Christ are no longer suffering can keep a person going. But you can say more. You can help others cling to Jesus the way Mary did. You can pour in the courage of the Crown Jewel of the Christian faith. **"We believe that Jesus died and rose. And so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."** (1

Thessalonians 4:14) We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Amen.