

We all face death.

On Remembrance Day we remember life in death. Remembrance Day provides our nation moment for pause, to recall the lives of those who have died in service to our country in the armed forces. In faith we also remember and give thanks to God for His blessings for peace through these who have served. We recognize those disabled in service, and pray for the protection and faithful service of all who continue to serve.

We remember life in death. But what happens beyond death?

Magician Ehrich Weisz boasted that he could escape from anything, even death. He became famous for his death-defying escapes. But, caught off-guard by a punch to the stomach, and later, dying from peritonitis, inflammation of the abdominal wall, at age 52, among his last words were: “I’m tired of fighting.” Houdini died.

What happens beyond death?

There's popular interest, to be sure. You could go to Netflix Official Site “Life After Death with Tyler Henry 2022.” Or search out shows like Charmed, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Vampire Diaries, Supernatural, Teen Wolf, or Resurrection ten years back, and you can explore numerous ways human-like beings come back to life. Human imagination is intrigued by what lies on the other side. Zombies movies show the living dead infiltrating the world of the living. With those who have returned, there is ever the question of “what for?” Often it’s to right some wrong. The souls of people murdered, for example, are restless, seeking some sort of justice. However, even with “second chances,” these “living again” people wind up dying a second time (or more), and their physical bodies finally disappear.

What happens beyond death?

We cannot know from experience, nor can science determine any conscious evidence beyond physical death and bodily functions. In reality, both death and the process of dying are cause for great grief. Without hope, it can be overwhelming.

Two notable Christian-based experiences have been recorded recently in books and movies.

First are real-life events that took place in 2004, as recorded in the book: “Heaven is for Real.” Colton, age 4, becomes very ill with appendicitis, and draws near death. In hospital, his parents are stricken with grief. His father, Todd Burpo, a Wesleyan pastor in Imperial, Nebraska, wrestles with God in the chapel. Colton's mother, Sonja, seeks prayers of their church and community. Colton recovers. Afterward, Colton begins speaking of his experiences, beginning with seeing the doctors operate on his body from above. He tells his parents each what they were doing at that critical time of his operation. Next Colton in spirit enters into their empty church, where he is welcomed by singing angels. Then Jesus receives him and takes him into heaven. He sits Colton on His lap, and assures him no one will ever hurt him there. Colton sees multitudes of animals and indescribable beautiful colours. Jesus invites him to meet passed relatives in heaven he otherwise could not have known about. After Colton recovered, he shared especially with his father these experiences

of heaven. Dad, the pastor, was astonished and wrestled what they should mean. The comments of Colton that Dad began to present at church raised astonished, incredulous interest, but also controversy, discomfort, and teasing by others, regarding the afterlife. Colton's testimony yet today asserts, in simple, otherwise inexplicable details, that “Heaven is for Real.”

Second is the 2019 movie, “BreakThrough.” It is based on the real-life story of 14-year-old teenager, John Smith, who dropped through the ice into Lake Saint Louis, near St. Louis, Missouri, on January 19, 2015. He was underwater 15 minutes before being found. Including the subsequent 40 minutes of medical care, he was without a pulse for about an hour. He was technically dead. “No spontaneous respirations. No heart tones. In essence, he was cold and he was dead. He was gone,” said Dr. Kent Sutterer, the ER doctor on duty that day. He approached his mother, Joyce, indicating it was time to say her goodbyes. She walked to the bed, touched the exposed toes, cold and grey, and there prayed out loud desperately. “‘Holy Spirit, please come and give me back my son.’ And within moments, he started to have a heartbeat,” she recalled. (per *historyvshollywood.com*) John Smith, I read, remains thankful to the hundreds of personnel involved in his rescue, and follows basketball passionately, serves as the Coach of Renegades, a basketball team based in O’Fallon, Missouri, and additionally, is a Motivational Speaker who often addresses large crowds and is always open to discussing faith’s role in his life. (*Basketball star Steph Curry is an executive producer of this film*)

With so many ideas, what is the truth about what happens beyond death?

Humans apart from God’s Word remain uninformed, not knowing the truth. In our human situation, even with Bibles available, we can be concerned and confused with ideas or questions that sidetrack us from Holy Scripture’s clear promises. Starve faith from God’s truth, and we, too, live without hope.

However, our God in Christ Jesus has revealed “***The Truth about the Resurrection.***” Indeed, we confess in the Apostles' Creed: “*We believe in. . .the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*” From God’s Word, as recorded in today’s Epistle reading, here are six points for our faith to cling to.

**1. There is specific truth that God has shared about the resurrection of the dead.**

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is among numerous passages in Scripture that clarify this truth. It begins: “**We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers.**” St. Paul writes this letter to the Thessalonians after he was beaten and driven out by force from their city. He had shared the Gospel there during his second missionary journey, traveling with Silas and Timothy. Acts 16 and 17 record how he had been sent by the brothers off to Berea, then on to Athens, to keep him from further beatings or being killed. Nevertheless, St. Paul writes with loving care to spell out the truth about the resurrection. Apparently through Timothy, Paul had learned that the new Christians in Thessalonica were grieving terribly when loved ones died. They feared these dead people would be left behind if they couldn’t stay alive until Jesus came back. In spite of faith in Christ, they feared being separated never to meet again. Paul writes to correct their inaccurate understanding.

**2. The Truth About the Resurrection gives hope**, so that we don't have to grieve and mourn the loss of those who have died in Christ as if they're now not included in God's kingdom of heaven. (v.13) According to Romans 6:3-4, Baptism is not merely an outward sign to show people that we claim to be Christian; it is God's power at work! For Holy Baptism unites us to all Jesus has accomplished for us--by His innocent death and *His* resurrection!

Living Hope is truly God's work. Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to come alongside us. Holy Baptism delivers this promise! The Holy Spirit leads us to see and to place trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. Every suffering and trial Jesus bore resulted in our redemption. His redeeming work means we will receive the crown of life. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus' Word abides with us and in us. He fills us with living and certain hope.

**3. The Truth About the Resurrection is certain because we believe in Jesus, who died and rose again.** (v.14) Because of Jesus, God's Word describes “death,” for all who believe in Him, not as a final event after which there is nothing, but as a matter of having “fallen asleep.”

By inspiration, St. Paul refers to those Christians who died as “those who are asleep.” This reminds us of Jesus' own references to death as equivalent to being asleep. Recall John 11, when Martha sent word to ask Jesus to come since brother Lazarus was near death. Remember what He said when, two days later, Jesus told the disciples, **“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him”?** (John 11:11)

Amazing isn't it? If we listen to God's Word, we hear Him share His viewpoint about death with us. Here we may search and dig and grasp for every wholistic and scientific chance to stay alive and push off death. Our God is assuring us He has that power. That's God's attitude about death: it's only sleeping. Of course, to relate God's view to our view, **Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died,”** but God's purpose in Christ is quickly back in central focus: **“and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”** (John 11:14-15) And we know Jesus' powerful Word of command ripped death's shackles from Lazarus and raised him to walk out from the tomb he'd been laid in for four days. All this foreshadowed Jesus' own saving purpose, to suffer, die, and the third day rise again! This brings us to point four:

**4. The Truth About the Resurrection is based on the Lord's Word.** Paul isn't just guessing and inventing a story to try to calm troubled souls who mourn the loss of their loved ones. He declares the Living, Eternal, and powerful Word. He asserts the truth about the resurrection so people like you and me can let go of excessive grieving. Instead of dread, look ahead through faith in Jesus, and see God's plan, the wonderful future.

**5. The Truth About the Resurrection is specific in details that the Lord, through St. Paul, now shares:** **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command. . .with the sound of the trumpet of God.”** So, we who are alive will not somehow get so far ahead of those who died, as if to be at the head of some line waiting to do the rides at Disneyland, somehow separated from those dead and left behind. No, in fact, **“The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up**

**together with them to meet the Lord in the air.”** And here’s the wonderful news: together, all who have died under God’s grace through faith in Jesus, our Saviour, and we who yet live through this same Faith, **will be always with the Lord.** (v.16-17)

This is not some resurrection of dead humans to a second kind of earthly life, to roam around troubled and searching to make sense of it all. Nor do the dead somehow become alive again to get revenge on those who mistreated them, or to say I’m sorry to someone they hurt, nor to be free to do anything and everything one wants and desires. Those death-causing lifestyles will be judged by Jesus in all power and authority on the Last Day, the Day of Final Judgment, which this verse refers to. No, this verse does not teach a so-called “rapture” as a secret first coming of Christ. That teaching comes from a misunderstanding of this verse tied in with the reference to the first resurrection in Revelation 20, as if it implies the beginning of a time of great tribulation for seven years, to be followed by a literal thousand year reign, all before Christ returns for a real Last Day that finally brings a final judgment. The first resurrection of Revelation 20 refers to the resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life through faith in Jesus. Scripture does not teach this as a first round time when “true believers” are taken up, like those bumper stickers that say “At the rapture, this car will be unmanned,” while the rest of people left behind go through further events leading to a literal Battle of Armageddon still to come. No, next week we hear St. Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 5, **“For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”** At the trumpet sound, Christ’s return is immediately the Final Day of Judgment. In the Day of Judgment, those who do not have faith in the forgiveness which streams from the blood shed by God’s Son on the cross, will be judged for their sin. Their unbelief will result in the second death and everlasting punishment, removed from the God whose power is revealed in Jesus, the Lamb, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. But to all who believe and are raised to life, **“We will always be with the Lord.”**

## **6. God’s Word shares the Truth About the Resurrection to encourage us.**

**“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”** (v.18)

From the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians, (TLSB p.2051),  
“Though Paul does describe the events of the Last Day, in response to confusion on this subject, he does not make the Last Day the [main] emphasis of the Letter. He calls the believers to live in the Gospel and to fulfill their calling in the joy of the Holy Spirit. He leaves us an example to follow: know the truths about Christ’s return but do not obsess about them.”

Take courage, brothers and sisters in Christ! God’s wonderful plan for your *eternity with Him* is the incredible and joyous focus of the Gospel. God loves you in Christ! You and I and all those departed in the faith are eternally blessed in Christ Jesus, through Word and the Sacraments--Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Let us encourage each other in this!

May this Good News keep and sustain you in the true faith--through life and also through death--to the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting! Amen.