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John 11:25, NRSVue.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.

Your last breath, then your first.

We are all familiar with the story of Jesus arriving at the home of the sisters Martha and Mary, just after the death of Lazarus. Martha complains to Jesus that if he had gotten there sooner, their brother would still be alive. Jesus tells her that Lazarus will live again. Martha, misunderstanding, says yeah, she knows that Lazarus will live again at the End of Time. In truth, Jesus is going to bring her brother back to life, but first he makes a much more important point. He says to her: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.* Jesus often does this, cleverly talking in a way that artfully compares life on earth with eternal life. Jesus says that even if you die, meaning if you die on Earth, you will live, meaning live for eternity. Indeed: one follows the other. Your last breath on Earth is followed by your first breath in Heaven. But people – including believers - tend to fear death on Earth without correspondingly looking forward to immediately being alive again.

There is, of course, a couple of very logical reasons for this. Physical death is much more real to us than eternal life, no matter how deep our faith. We are also very rarely prepared for death. There is, of course, the possibility that the End of Time will come before we die our earthly deaths. In 1 Thessalonians, Chapter 4, Paul warns the faithful in Thessalonica about the possibility of this:

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

To interpret this passage, we need to put ourselves in the context of Paul's beliefs and the assumptions of those believers in Thessalonica. Paul, and most followers of Christ of the time, thought that Jesus would return soon, probably within their lifetimes. But even during the brief period between Paul founding the church in Thessalonica and Paul writing this letter there were probably people in that church who had died. They were apparently wondering about the eternal destiny of those people who were unlucky enough to die before Jesus could come again and bring about the End Times. Paul is making it clear that "God will bring with him those who have died." Further, the ones who are still alive when Jesus comes again "will

by no means precede those who have died;” in other words, the faithful who have died are already with God for eternity. And, at the end of time, all believers who have passed away and all believers who are still alive *“will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.”* Importantly, since they will one day be in the Kingdom of God for all of eternity, they should *“encourage one another”* with this knowledge.

I can tell you as a chaplain that many people who do not attend church, who are not active believers, will, nonetheless, remark at the tragic loss of a young person that this individual is with God now. I’m not questioning the faith of these people. Although they have drifted away from their Christian roots, they do at some level believe. They’re doing more than simply making themselves feel better and robbing the moment of some of its tragedy. An unexpected, unfathomable death can in truth renew someone’s faith. It can remind a person that your last breath on this planet is indeed followed by your first breath in the afterlife.

We are well served to prepare for this transition. But mostly, we prepare in a negative fashion. Our society doesn’t talk about death much. Periodically, we are reminded of our mortality by people trying to make money off us by selling us life insurance. We are warned that our loved ones might not be able to pay for our funerals, and we will, in death, become a burden. As a chaplain, I have heard

people who are approaching death talking about their regrets. We've all heard the old joke that nobody on their death bed says that they wished they had worked more. Indeed, a common regret is that a person hasn't allowed themselves to enjoy life more. And I mean *allow themselves*: even deep believers who know that between those two breathes they will continue in the Kingdom of God and will instantly transition from one realm to the other will look back at their lives and wonder about how they managed to be so stressed out. It's like someone who gets in an elevator to go to their home in a high rise, not knowing if their apartment is on the twentieth floor or on the one hundred and twentieth floor. What do they do? They spend the entire trip instead of relaxing and chatting with people around them, anxiously waiting to see if the next floor is going to be the floor they are supposed to get off on. There is something about the indefinite nature of life, of the indeterminate length of our time on Earth that robs us of our ability to enjoy the journey. We're too worried that the next floor might be ours, and we will run out of time to get things done before we die. Others have the opposite problem: they assume that they live on the top floor and that they'll have plenty of time to have fun later.

Imagine preparing in a positive way. Consider the end of Hebrews 9:

Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

There are two things here. First, we all have an appointment with death, a predetermined time when we will die. We just don't happen to know when that is - and we certainly cannot cancel the reservation that God has made for us in advance. Second, Jesus will come again, and he isn't going to have to suffer a second time. When he returns it will only be to greet those who have remained faithful and are eagerly waiting for him. We, as believers, will not face a second death. Consider verse 15 of Psalm 116, which is dedicated to the ways in which God eases pain, meets his promises, and gives us hope. The Psalmist is facing death, but knows that God will be faithful because he, the Psalmist, has been faithful:

*¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.*

This tells us that God views the death of each of us as something significant, not something to be dismissed in the moment and forgotten. God is not indifferent as to how and when a believer dies. If it is not our time to die, God will move to protect us. Despite the fact that death comes to all of us, and even in the case of a death that will be followed by an eternal, blessed reward, God will not consider a

human death as insignificant. God knows that death on Earth is an important stage in the eternal life of a human. Consider 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5:

5 For we know that, if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to be further clothed with our heavenly dwelling, ³ for surely when we have been clothed in it we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan under our burden because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ The one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a down payment.

Paul is explaining to the believers in Corinth what happens when we die. He compares our human, earthly body to a tent, something flimsy that is easily destroyed. God will, however, replace it with a strong house made with heavenly hands. Once we are there, in our permanent house, we will be secure, no longer living in a tent that is exposed to the elements. To assure us that we will indeed be in that heavenly house one day, God gave us the Holy Spirit to help us see the future, to erase our doubt. This is what gives us peace as believers: as we approach the end of our lives – and we are always approaching death – we feel the presence of the Spirit and we know that eternity with God is very real.

Paul talks of his confidence in Philippians, Chapter 1:

²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this,

I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that, by my presence again with you, your boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.

There is a subtlety here, when it comes to the believer considering death. Paul founded the church at Philippi during what we call his second missionary journey, probably around the year 50 A.D., in other words, somewhat later in his missionary years. We read about it in the Book of Acts. He crossed over the Aegean Sea from what is now Turkey to Macedonia, now part of Greece. The city was rebuilt (or possibly founded) by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., so it was an ancient city when Paul got there. Like so much of the known world, it became part of the Roman Empire when it was conquered; in the case of Philippi, it was taken from the Persians in 168 B.C. It was a fertile city with gold and silver mines. Paul is a prisoner at the time of his writing. Just before our passage, he tells the believers in Philippi that his coming trial will advance the Gospel. He apparently believes he will be found innocent.

Notice how confidently he speaks of possibly losing his trial and being executed: if he stays alive, then that's good because he can continue his evangelism. On the other hand, he says, his true desire is to die so that he can be with Christ. It is far better to be in the afterlife than to be on Earth. But he says – and this is the important message of this passage – he knows that he should remain

alive for the sake of the believers in the church at Philippi. Their faith is not yet strong enough. He wants them to be able to look as favorably toward death as he does.

One of the things that makes all of us nervous about death is that we don't know that much about the afterlife, what it will be like. The Bible doesn't give us much information. There are some metaphorical and colorful statements made in the Bible about the afterlife, much of it in Revelation. I won't read you the passages, but we are told that there will be no more death, no tears, nothing impure, no spiritual darkness, and all our needs will be met. There will be singing. There is even a suggestion that we will be reunited with loved ones who have already passed. We are told in 1 Corinthians that we will be perfected. But here is a critical part, and this comes from the words of Jesus himself in the Gospel of Matthew: we will see God. Now here is something that I will quote. To me, it is the most powerful statement about our lives after we have died on Earth. It is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 15, and these are the words of Jesus: *² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.* Jesus is predicting his crucifixion here. He's going to die. But he's going to be taking care

of us, even in his absence. He is making preparations for us to join him. To me, that is an incredible statement. We need to accept the full reality of a life after death and the truth that God will indeed be waiting there to embrace us.

Some of us die without warning. Others, usually because we have some sort of terminal illness, have time to contemplate the end of our earthly lives. I've had some beautiful conversations with folks who know they will die soon. I once walked into the room of a woman who was dying of cancer. This was not someone I was seeing as a chaplain. I was visiting a friend of a friend, someone whom I had met in passing, and only once. My friend thought that it might be good for her to talk to me, as she had had a chaotic life, having suffered tragedy multiple times, including her husband and a child in a car accident. She was somewhat younger than me. As I walked in, she was laughing. I saw that she was reading a Bible. She looked up, recognizing me – to my surprise – and said: “Buzz, glad to see you. What does this crazy passage from Proverbs mean?” She was reading 31:6,

*⁶ Give strong drink to one who is perishing
and wine to those in bitter distress.*

I told her that this is part of a longer passage that makes a statement against drinking too much. The context of this passage is that strong drink should not become a habit. In biblical times, however, since they didn't have drugs to relieve

pain, they would indeed give alcohol to someone who was suffering, especially in death. She laughed again and said that of course, she should have thought of that. Then, as I sat down to talk to her, her nurse came in with her next dose of fentanyl. She quipped that her strong drink had arrived. After the nurse left, I knew I would only have a brief amount of time before the pain killer would kick in and she would probably grow somnolent. She asked me to pray with her, which I did. Then, as her eyelids began to flutter, she said that she wondered if she would recognize her last breath when it happened. I said no, but that I bet she would recognize her first breath in her new life.

Please pray with me.

God, one of the biggest challenges for a believer is to not be afraid of death. Help us embrace and full accept the reality of the eternal life to come. Let that knowledge give us joy each day and take away the worry that comes with a chaotic, earthly life. God, we may not be able to predict what frightening or terrible thing might happen to us tomorrow in this life, but let us never doubt that one day, we will be with you and all will be perfect and permanent. Amen.