

When Christ Shall Come

1 Thess. 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

23 Pentecost 2017
November 12, 2017

“How will I know her?”

That was the question Burt, a 70 something member of my congregation in Stevensville asked as he was slowly coming to accept the hard reality that he would outlive Janet, his beloved wife of over 50 years. The question came while we both waited for the grim-faced heart surgeon to come into the waiting room and tell us that they had done all they could do, but her heart was too weak, the damage too extensive, the intervention too late – all the usual caveats of medicine’s failure to fix what is too broke.

Burt always expected it would be the other way around. She would survive him, join a widows group, play cards, coddle grandchildren and meet him on the other side decades later. But in those dark, intense moments of waiting and crying, all the questions about life after death, the when’s and how’s and where’s - all the questions left unasked for a lifetime, suddenly shouted back with unexpected urgency.

Burt was a faithful man, obediently confessing the words of the Apostles Creed, **“I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”** But, Burt was also an engineer. He had questions. Does the resurrection of the body apply to those who are cremated? Will the broken bones, worn hearts, and dimmed minds follow us through the pearly gates? How will I know her? How will she know me? Burt looked desperately to me to give him an answer.

These are the kinds of pastoral moments you can never really train for in seminary. No one wants to admit that sometimes God leaves the moment open to inspiration and interpretation, right there, on the spot. I suspect it was the same kind of pastoral urgency that faced St. Paul during the early days of the Christian Church. What do you say to anxious people looking for answers that aren’t in the book?

Paul, perhaps more than anyone else, expected Jesus to return, in the flesh, any day, soon, maybe even tomorrow. When Jesus did return, all bets were off as far as life and death and disease and war and hardship as people experienced these things in this life. When Jesus comes back as Lord of all creation, that’s the end of history as we know it, a total reset. Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection. That much we knew. But, that’s about as far as it went. Jesus died. Jesus was resurrected. Jesus ascended into heaven, as attested by those who knew him and saw him. Then there was a promise. Jesus would come again.

Beyond that, no specifics were given, which was fine and dandy as long as folks went on living their lives and getting their affairs in order while awaiting Christ’s return. Frankly, that was Paul’s bigger concern when writing to the Church in Thessalonica. Live your lives now as if Jesus could walk in any minute. **“As you learned from us,”** wrote Paul, **“how you ought to live and to please God. For you know what instructions we gave you through Jesus Christ.”**

The problem was that Christ didn’t come back right away. Years past. Older Christians started to die off. People started to wonder. What about Gramma? If she, a good Christian if ever there was, is dead, how is she going to be part of the reign of Christ? How will we know her? People looked to Paul for an answer.

“Burt,” I said. **“You are an engineer. You conceive a product long before any such thing exists, right?”**

“True,” he said. **“I get an image in my mind. Then I work out the details in the design.”**

“Exactly,” I said. **“Then you record your design with drawings and specifications and materials lists, all the stuff you need to make the thing you conceived in your mind. Does it really matter whether the screws and rivets came from Michigan or Minnesota, as long as they meet the specifications of your design?”**

“No, I suppose not,” he said, **“as long as they meet the specifications.”**

“Burt,” I asked, **“what then is more real, the machine as it is actually constructed and will, one day, wear out and be scrapped – all the screws and rivets carted off to the recycling bin, or the machine in your mind, the design you worked out and recorded? What endures, Burt? How do you know the machine – your machine?”**

Burt looked up, tears wetting his cheeks. **“I think I get what you are saying, pastor.”**

“In a couple days we are going to put Janet’s body into the ground,” I said, “earth to earth, dust to dust. One day, we don’t know when, but one day for sure, God will raise Janet from the dead, the Janet created in God’s mind, the Janet created in God’s own image, the Janet God knows down to the last screw, rivet, and DNA molecule, the Janet you, through the gifts of love and marriage have come to know. She will be whole and well, just as God designed her to be. You will know her. In the meantime, Burt, you have work to do. Your children will look to you for comfort and hope. Your grandchildren will need to hear stories about their grandmother and her unique ability to turn driftwood into art. Your faith will be a witness to your family that death does not have the last word. Your life will be an example to them that you trust in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

Grief still wracked Burt’s body that afternoon. But, in the midst of his tears, I believe I saw a look of peace settle over him as we prayed and prepared for the days to come. In retrospect, I have often wondered whether I had license to speak for God in the way that I did to Burt that day. It felt like a moment of revelation, some kind of divine permission to describe what is yet unknown in ways familiar to the mind of an engineer. I suppose I will never know until such time as I am called to give account for the deeds and misdeeds I have perpetrated in my lifetime.

That said, a part of me wonders if Paul faced a similar challenge when writing to the church in Thessalonica. Jesus never said anything about the dead rising to meet him while descending from heaven. This vivid description in Paul’s letter is the only place in all of scripture where such a resurrection scenario is provided. Paul’s intent, however, is clear. Jesus is coming to the earth, not hauling a select few from it. All the faithful, even those who have died in Christ, are going out (or up, in this case) to meet him on the way. No one is left behind, not even the dead. So, good Thessalonian Christians, stop worrying about grandma and get on with the business of living a life in preparation for Christ. To push it a little further in terms of Jesus parable of the wedding party, stock up on lamp oil. Be prepared to wait faithfully for the bridegroom to return. Live lives in accordance with the expectation of Christ’s return. Keep the faith. Abide in hope.

A final note, as I have reflected on these things over the better part of my pastoral vocation. If what I said to Burt that day in the hospital does carry the sanction of divine inspiration, then there is more that can be said about the life to come. Whatever we mean about the resurrection of the body, it seems to me that the body restored will be the body as it was designed in the mind of God to be. I can imagine Janet without the crippling pain of arthritis and the debilitating effects of heart disease. Gayle, I can see a Shandy, whole and well and happy in

her own untortured skin. To all of you, I can imagine the new heaven and earth revealed to the author of Revelation where pain and tears and death will be no more. In the meantime, we are called to live in that vision, upholding one another with our prayers, standing by one another in our joys and griefs, living as if Christ could walk through the door any minute. Amen