



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

How Are the Dead Raised Up?

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

November 12, 2023

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

How are the dead raised up? That's the question Sammy Beckett's father, an African-American preacher in rural North Carolina, asked in his homily at the funeral of Sammy's mother Hazel. Young Sammy sat on the front row of the church and his daddy, the preacher, brought him up to the open casket. He gave him the Bible and Sammy read the passage that comprises the opening sentences of our funeral service: 'I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.' Sammy's father asked everyone present, 'Do you believe this?' And he glanced down at his son. Sammy dropped the Bible, looked into his mother's face, and cried, 'Please come back. You can't leave me. Please come back.'

That is the beginning of an episode of *China Beach*, a television series that premiered 35 years ago. It told the stories of the women and men of a military evacuation hospital during the Vietnam War. As a preacher's kid, young Sammy felt abandoned and became disheartened when his mother didn't come back, wondering if all that he heard from his father was true. When he was drafted as an infantryman in Vietnam, he told a buddy that his religion was 'Southern Atheist.'

In our epistle lesson from First Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul was concerned that the people of this early Christian community were also feeling disheartened. They believed that Jesus was coming back soon and that they would be united with him. But they missed their family and friends who had died in the meantime. They were anxious about where they had gone and what would become of them. They asked, 'have those we loved been abandoned?' Paul wrote to them to offer pastoral care and reassurance. He sought to give them comfort by letting them know that their loved ones were at rest, at peace, and would, ultimately, be with Jesus.

Unfortunately, his explanation helped give credence to the misguided notion of the rapture – that upon Jesus's return, some will be taken up into the sky and others will be

‘left behind.’ But what this passage is really about is hope – the hope of the unity of the living with the dead in Christ. The image of being caught up in the clouds with Jesus, reunited with those we love can be a beautiful one, whether it’s real or metaphorical. It invites us to wonder: are there ways we can be caught up in the clouds while still here on earth?

Sammy and his new friend nicknamed Deadman got caught misbehaving while on R&R at China Beach. Their commander punished them by assigning them to the Graves Registration Unit, the morgue. At first, Sammy thought this was a cushy job, away from the battle lines in a quiet, peaceful setting. He learned that there were profound responsibilities in his new assignment. He soon had to perform them alone, because Deadman was reassigned to an infantry unit.

Deadman died shortly thereafter, and it fell on Sammy’s shoulders to prepare his body for burial and to disburse his belongings according to the will he left on a cassette tape. Deadman left his watch to Sammy. That watch became Sammy’s prized possession.

Sammy became a changed person after his friend’s death. He grieved deeply over the loss of his closest companion. Sammy fell to his knees outside the chapel, looked up at the stained-glass window, and prayerfully sang,

‘Precious Lord,
take my hand
Lead me on,
let me stand
I’m tired,
I’m weak,
I’m alone
Through the storm,
through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand
precious Lord,
lead me home.’

From that point on, he was no longer Sammy. He went by Samuel, his given name, the Biblical name his father called him. Christ had come to him. Deadman’s death marked a new beginning for Samuel. Jurgen Moltmann writes: ‘Wherever life is perceived and lived in community and fellowship in Christ, a new beginning is discovered hidden in every end. What it is I do not know, but I have confidence the new beginning will find me and raise me up.’

Samuel Beckett devoted the rest of his time in Vietnam to taking precious care of his men, as he called them – the men who died, over whom he was given custody. He carefully and reverently prepared their bodies for burial. Samuel made sure their belongings and letters were sent properly and tenderly to their loved ones. He took the time to learn each of his men's stories. His men were alive to him. The Graves Registration Unit was no longer a job. It became to Samuel a sacred calling and ministry. Ironically, his time in the morgue awakened him and raised him up from that which was dead inside himself and gave him a new life.

The episode ends in 1985 at the funeral of Samuel's father. Samuel was asked to give the eulogy. He started by recalling the words his father preached at his mother's funeral all those years ago: 'How are the dead raised up?'

Samuel showed the congregation the watch his friend Deadman had given him. He shared that while Deadman died, somehow his watch was still running after all these years. He said each tick of that watch was a reminder that Deadman was still alive. Samuel said, 'He lives in me.' Samuel teared up as he looked over at his father's casket. He said he still felt the echo of his father's voice in that church. Samuel said, 'My father lives in me too. The two of them live in me. They live in all of us.'

Maybe that's what it means to be caught in the clouds with Jesus and those we love. The passage from First Thessalonians ends: 'Therefore encourage one another with these words.' Paul is telling the community and us that this is good news! Death and abandonment will never have the last word.

For Jesus is coming to us.

Jesus lives in us.

And Jesus will raise us up.

Amen.