

Saints Triumphant
November 14, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
John 5:25-29
Jesus Will Raise You

Dear Friends in Christ,

In 1920 Great Britain honored a group of soldiers who had died in World War I. These were the unknown dead, those who had not been identified. The next year, the United States honored four unknown soldiers who were buried in France. Their bodies were brought to the United States with the highest honor possible. One was chosen to lie in state at the Capitol rotunda, an honor usually reserved for the most well known leaders. On November 11, 1921 the body of the unknown soldier was taken to Arlington National Cemetery, escorted by the President, Vice President, and all the members of the Supreme Court. The unknown soldier was awarded the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross.

For one hundred years, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been a place of high honor and respect. Since 1948, the Tomb has been guarded every hour of every day by the Tomb Sentinel. The changing of the guard is something everyone should observe. I've been there and almost everyone is moved by the honor given to the unknown dead. Someone whose name we do not know gave his life for me. I don't know that we, as citizens of the United States, could find any other way to so honor the unknown soldiers who gave everything for us. We give them a tomb in the place of highest honor in Arlington National Cemetery. It is the best we can do and it is good for us to do this.¹

But Jesus can do better. We can honor their sacrifice, celebrate their lives, build monuments and write history about all who have gone before us. But Jesus can do better. Jesus can and will raise all the dead. Listen again to the words of Jesus chosen for this Saints Triumphant Sunday.

John 5:25–29 (NIV84)

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

The Sadducees at the time of Christ did not believe in an afterlife, no heaven or hell. Therefore, they did not believe in any kind of resurrection from the dead. They believed in the God revealed in the first five books of the Bible but they thought that this life was all you got. Therefore live a good life now and God will give you a good life on this earth. There is nothing after you die. Just be a good person now.

This attitude is similar to many others religious philosophies in the world, even similar to atheists today. One popular atheist today is Bill Nye (the science guy). He believes you have about 30,000 days of life and then you die. He doesn't like it but he sees no evidence for life after death. So, he wants people to live good, productive lives with the short time we have.² Another popular atheist is Neil

¹ Info taken from <https://www.arlingtontours.com/tomb-of-the-unknown-soldier>

² 2017 Big Think episode. <https://youtu.be/DylfWmecrO0>

deGrasse Tyson. He does not believe in life after death either. However, he wants to be buried rather than cremated so that his body will feed the flowers and fauna he used to feed his body when alive.³ This is his hope in his death.

To Sadducees and to atheists the hope of resurrection to eternal life is a false hope. It is just something people have invented to make us feel better about death. It is too horrible to think that our bodies will wear out, our minds will decline and we will cease to exist. So throughout history people have made up stories that give hope and comfort in the face of death. After all, it is nice to think that after death we will come to life and have bodies and minds that work even better than at our prime.

We Christians can sometimes lean towards the ideas of the Sadducees and even the atheists when death arrives. What do we say at the visitation before a funeral or after a funeral when greeting the family of the deceased? He was such a good guy. She was so wonderful. It might be true, but if that is all we say, aren't we implying that this life is all that matters, that being a good person is what is important. And what if he was not such a great guy and she was not such a wonderful woman? Then the comfort we tried to give is even more hollow.

There has also been a trend to change from calling it a funeral, to calling it a celebration of life. Now, this can be done well. For as Christians we celebrate and thank the Lord for giving the person spiritual life in baptism, physical life on this earth, and eternal life through faith in Christ. Too often though, the celebration of life is focused on the earthly life of the person while the spiritual and eternal life are barely if at all mentioned.

But we don't need to resort to empty words of hope and comfort. We have the words of Jesus himself to give certain hope and complete comfort.

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.... for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

Jesus will raise all the dead on the Last Day with his voice. Why do we know this to be true. Not because it makes sense. Not because it feels right. We trust that Jesus will raise the dead because it is Jesus who says this. Six chapters later, Jesus will call out in a loud voice to a man who had been dead and buried for four days. And Lazarus came out of the tomb. Not long after that Jesus will be crucified, dead and buried. And on the third day, Jesus will rise from the dead. Death holds no power over Christ.

Maybe you've heard the saying: Jesus said it. I believe it. That settles it. This saying is not quite right. We can leave out one line and instead say: Jesus said it. That settles it. It does not matter if I believe that Jesus will raise all the dead on the Last Day. He said that he will and so it will happen. Jesus' promises are not dependent on our faith. His promises are certain because he is the One who died and rose again, just as he said.

While our faith does not affect the promises of God to us, God's promises affect our faith. We believe that Jesus will raise us and all the dead because the Holy Spirit has called us to faith by the gospel. So what is this about "*those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.*" Is Jesus now telling us that we receive eternal life by good works, that only those with enough good will rise to live? To answer that, we go to the verse immediately preceding our verses for today. In John 5:24 Jesus tells us who is good: *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*

³ 2019 interview on Larry King Live. <https://youtu.be/LI3CarGIpas>

The good are those who have the gift of faith that is given by the Holy Spirit through the promise of God that we have eternal life through Jesus Christ. All the glory is God's! The good, the believers in Christ, will rise from their graves on the Last Day and live. There is no condemnation for believers now or on that day. We will live. Every believer who sleeps now in the grave will live and live forever.

A very good friend of my family died of cancer last week. I was able to attend Cindy's funeral service virtually by watching the recording. It was not called a celebration of life but instead was a victory celebration. I kind of like that name for a funeral, a victory celebration. For Christ has won the victory over death and will raise all believers to life eternal one day. The pastor did not go on and on about how good Cindy was but went on and on about how great Jesus is and how wonderful heaven is. Everyone is now or will be in the future missing someone who has died. What great hope Jesus gives us that one day he will call all the dead to life and bring us together with all believers into the heaven he has prepared for us. We will never have to miss them again.

If you want to honor and remember those who died in defense of our nation, Arlington National cemetery is one of the best places to do that. If you want to observe the solemn changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown, it is not difficult to find. Millions of people have found it and stood silently, giving the highest respect to the unknowns who gave their lives for us.

Many have also gone in search of another tomb. If you take a tour of Jerusalem, which I haven't yet, tour guides will take you to this tomb or that tomb and claim it is the tomb where Christ was laid. I doubt we have ever or will ever find the exact tomb, though there are likely tombs discovered that were very similar to Christ's. But even if we could find the very tomb of Christ it would be for a different reason than going to any other tomb. For that grave is already empty, only holding the dead body of Christ from Friday evening until Easter Sunday morning. Because Christ's grave is empty, we can be certain that the graves of our loved ones and our own will also be empty. For on the Last Day, Christ will call us and we will rise to live, to live eternally with Jesus. And the eternal victory celebration will have just begun.

Amen.