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A Sermon Preached by
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

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The Other Side of Grief

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Mark 5:1-15

Listen for God's Word:

"Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, we believe that God will bring with Him those who have died in Jesus. So encourage each other with these words."

1 Thessalonians 4:13,14,18

Martin Luther said, "I have held many things in my hands, and lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

There is a delightful story of the Englishman who was riding on a train from Scotland to London absorbed in his morning paper. Because he was reading the newspaper, he didn't notice when a very cheery Scotsman boarded the train and seated himself directly across the aisle from him. The Scotsman said to the Englishman, "Good morning." The Englishman was so into the newspaper that he didn't respond. The Scotsman then said, "Isn't this a beautiful country?" Again, the Englishman ignored the Scotsman. In one final attempt to get the Englishman's attention, the Scotsman leaned over the newspaper and said, "How do you like Scotland anyway?" Unable to ignore the Scotsman any longer, the Englishman responded, "I hate Scotland. It's cold, it's damp, and there are too many Presbyterians here." The Scotsman replied, "Well then, my friend, why don't you go to hell? It's warm,

it's dry, and there are no Presbyterians there!" I invite you this morning to hear an important truth: whether we are going to London, heaven or hell, we are always moving from one place to another.

This is precisely the important truth that the Apostle Paul is making to the church in Thessalonica, that we are always moving from one place to another until we reach our final destination of eternal life with God. Death isn't the end. Death is merely movement from life here on earth to life with God in heaven.

Yet, these words from Paul are among the most misunderstood words in the entire Bible. The misunderstanding goes something like this. If we have faith in God and believe in the promises of Jesus Christ, then when a loved one dies we will not grieve. After all, grief is for those who have no faith; for those who do not have the promises of the Bible to assure them of eternal life. Those who believe know with certainty where their loved one goes after death so we must choke back tears. That is the faithful response to the death of someone we love.

This is not what Paul is saying here in 1 Thessalonians. Paul wouldn't say this. Paul understands that grief is a part of God's most perfect design of human beings. Grief is the most natural way that we demonstrate to others and to ourselves that the one who died meant a great deal to us; that our lives are the

richer because of them. No, Paul is not asking us to stand strong in the midst of loss and avoid expressions of grief. What Paul is asking us is not to grieve like those who have no hope in the person of Jesus Christ. Grieve, yes. But grieve differently.

Paul understands that grief is a part of God's most perfect design of human beings. Grief is the most natural way that we demonstrate to others and to ourselves that the one who died meant a great deal to us; that our lives are the richer because of them.

That, of course, begs the question, what is the difference? The difference is an important one. Those who have no hope in Jesus Christ haven't heard the Gospel – that in the power of the cross, death is destroyed and everlasting life is received. For those who haven't heard the Gospel, death is simply the end. There is no more for the person who has died. Such loss, such grief is devastating. Relationship with someone once loved is forever gone. That is how those “who don't have any hope” grieve.

Paul fully expects that we will experience grief when someone close to us dies. What Paul is asking is that we remember the promises of our faith, that death isn't the end of life. Paul is encouraging us to experience grief that is mingled with the good news that our separation from a loved one is only temporary. God's promised resurrection from the dead is for those we love and for us. Because of God, there will be a heavenly reunion for all who have died. And at that time, death will be no more, promises the Book of Revelation. What each of us will have is life that never ends with one another and with God. That is the Gospel. That is the good news of our faith. With that knowledge

we grieve differently because we know we shall be with our loved ones again.

Don't be alarmed if grief lingers for a long time. But always hold onto the knowledge that there is more to come. The relationship that we treasured, the relationship that enriched our lives, has not come to a final end. In Jesus Christ we shall be together again.

Please understand that the period of grief is different for each person. Some may experience grief for many years following the death of a loved one. Don't be alarmed if grief lingers for a long time. But always hold onto the knowledge that there is more to come. The relationship that we treasured, the relationship that enriched our lives, has not come to a final end. In Jesus Christ we shall be together again. Grief is simply an expression that what we had with another was very good.

In our lesson from Mark's Gospel, Jesus confronts a man who is out of his mind. He is so crazed that he howls day and night and cuts himself with sharp stones. Mark tells us that people have become terrified of him, that no one is able to restrain him. Yet, Jesus confronts him face to face. Jesus isn't frightened of him.

John Claypool, that wonderful preacher tells us that he had a New Testament instructor once advance a theory of why this man was so crazy, so out of his mind. The clue was in the man's location; the man was in a cemetery. According to this one biblical scholar, it may be that this man brought a loved one to the cemetery to be buried. And he is one of those that Paul speaks of that have no hope. The man thought that death was the end – the end of life, the end of their

relationship. Such was this man's despair that he literally lost his mind and was unable to leave the place where he buried his wife, his brother or dear friend. His grief defeated him. That is until he is confronted by the person of Jesus. In Jesus, he sees for the first time the hope that there is more to life than death can take away. In Jesus Christ, hope is restored; that he will again continue the relationship that ended with death.

Paul wants us to understand that death is movement from one place to another. The power of death is destroyed when we grasp this truth of our faith.

There is something more in Paul's words to the Church in Thessalonica. Paul concludes his teaching on death and eternal life by instructing us to "encourage each other with these words." Paul's concern is that grief may become so great for any of us that we forget the promises of Jesus. The result, then, is that we fall into hopelessness and lose our minds like the crazed man in Mark's story. As a community of faith, we are to watch out for one another, stand with one another in loss and encourage one another with the promises of our faith.

Many of you know that I have a deep admiration for great preachers, both those who lived before me and those who practice their craft today. One preacher whose work has deeply influenced my own preaching died before I began preparation for ministry, Andrew Blackwood. I was introduced to him through his written work. For some twenty-five years he taught preachers at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Imagine, then, the sheer joy I experienced in the year 2000 when I began my ministry as pastor of Lenape Valley Presbyterian Church in New Britain, PA and learned that a member of that congregation was one of

Andrew's sons, Phil Blackwood. I developed a friendship with him that became one of my greatest treasures, personally and professionally.

Mr. Blackwood and I shared frequent lunches where he shared rich stories of growing up at Princeton. Among Mr. Blackwood's colorful stories of life in Princeton was that Dr. Albert Einstein was the baby-sitter of choice for the Blackwood family. Isn't that amazing, that Dr. Einstein enjoyed babysitting?

Some days Mr. Blackwood would put on a suit and tie simply to accompany me for a drive through Bucks County as we spoke of ministry and preaching in particular. One day I asked him if there was anything I could do special for him. He mentioned that it had been a very long time since he had been in Princeton, that he would enjoy seeing Princeton with me. We made plans for that to happen.

When the day came for our time together in Princeton, Mr. Blackwood was again in a coat and tie. We made the hour's drive to Princeton. We walked the familiar campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, stories around every corner. He showed me the home he grew up in and the home, just next door, where Dr. Einstein lived. We then walked the campus of Princeton University which is next door to the seminary, followed by a late lunch. Following lunch I could see that Mr. Blackwood was exhausted and I suggested that we return home for the day. There was no disagreement from him.

I walked Mr. Blackwood to his room at the retirement community where he lived and as we were saying goodbye, he said to me, "Doug, I love you. You are a good friend. I'll see you in the morning." He then repeated, "I'll see you in the morning." I had no plans

to see Mr. Blackwood the next day and my schedule was already full of appointments. But he was ninety-one years old, tired from the day at Princeton, so I just thought he was confused and said nothing.

The next morning when I arrived at work there was a man waiting for me in the parking lot of the church. He introduced himself as the nephew of Mr. Blackwood. He told me how much his uncle loved me and his gratitude for all that I had done for him. I quickly asked why he spoke in the past tense. "I am sorry," he said. "I thought you had been told. My uncle died last night in his sleep."

My tears were instant. With a man I had just met I could not control my tears. "How? What? We were just together yesterday. He told me that he loved me. He told me..." Then I remembered. Blackwood is a Scottish name. The Blackwood family was a Scottish family. Scottish Christians have a saying they share with loved ones when they know they are dying, "I'll see you in the morning," meaning that we will see one another next in heaven. They are words meant to encourage loved ones so they will have comfort in their loss.

The Apostle Paul tells the church in Thessalonica – and he tells us – to encourage one another so that we don't lose hope. Mr. Blackwood must have known that he was dying. His last words to me were of Christian hope. That is the other side of grief.