

Monday, July 9 – Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In one of his earliest letters, the apostle Paul reassured Christians who were concerned about other Christians who had died. As scholar William Barclay put it, “The idea of the Second Coming had brought another problem.... They could not be sure that those who had already died would share the glory of that day which [they believed] was so soon to come.” But Paul told them that, death notwithstanding, all disciples will “always be with the Lord.” Paul wanted the Thessalonians to grasp the vital truth that Jesus’ resurrection had forever defeated and neutralized death’s power to permanently end human life. Above all, there was no way death could any longer separate anyone from God and God’s love (cf. also Romans 8:38-39). How does trusting in that change your outlook on life, at whatever stage of life you presently find yourself? Barclay also wrote, “The picture Paul draws of the day when Christ will come is poetry, an attempt to describe what is indescribable.... It is not the details which are important. What is important is that in life and in death the Christian is in Christ and that is a union which nothing can break.” What factors make the day when Christ will come “indescribable”? How, despite that, can you live in the light and the hope of that day?

Tuesday, July 10 – Read John 11:17-27. Jesus’ friend Lazarus fell ill. However, Jesus did not arrive in Lazarus’ home town of Bethany until four days after his friend’s death. The man’s sisters, Martha and Mary, were pained and grieving, as we’d expect. Jesus shared their sadness (cf. John 11:35), but he also pledged to Lazarus’ grieving sister: “Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.” He was confident that his resurrected life was the pledge that we, too, would share in his life everlasting (cf. John 14:19). Martha greeted Jesus with the words, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” No doubt she, along with many of Jesus’ other followers, had seen him heal sick people. Now she feared things had gone too far, that her brother lay beyond Jesus’ power. Have you had times when you felt that a problem you were facing was too hard or too complicated for Jesus’ presence to be able to help you? Did you find any kind of help or strength, perhaps in an unexpected way? Scholar Alister McGrath wrote, “The word hope is ambiguous. ‘I hope it won’t rain’ means ‘I have a sinking feeling it will.’ That is hope in its weak sense.... But hope in its full-blooded sense means ‘a sure and confident expectation.’” In what ways did Martha move from weak hope to sure and confident hope in Jesus’ presence? In what ways have you been able to make the same movement to confident hope?

Wednesday, July 11 – Read John 5:19-24, 1 John 5:11-13. We often see “the life everlasting” as only far off in the future. But in John 5:24 John showed Jesus using the present tense: “I assure you that whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me HAS eternal life...HAS passed from death into life.” Methodism’s founder John Wesley hit a crucial turning point when he quit “wishing” or “hoping” to be saved. He recorded the change in these words: “An assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” Christian faith certainly looks to the future with hope. But the writings associated with John regularly put the idea of “eternal life” in the present tense (cf. John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47, 54, 10:28, as well as today’s reading). How have you “passed from death into life”? What is one aspect of your life where you are experiencing the eternal quality of life now, before your physical death ever happens? The Message captured what Wesley meant by the word “assurance” by phrasing 1 John 5:13 this way: “My purpose in writing is simply this: that you who believe in God’s Son will know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have eternal life.” Do you have that kind of confidence that God truly accepts you? In what ways has living with assurance created space in your life for you to experience the “fruit of the Spirit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Galatians 5:22-23)?

Thursday, July 12 – Read Acts 23:6-10, 24:14-21. Even before he met Christ, Paul (like most Pharisees) believed in the resurrection of the dead (based on passages like Daniel 12:1-3 and Isaiah 26:19). Scholar Craig Keener wrote, “The hope of the resurrection was central to Judaism, and many martyrs had died staking their hope on it. Paul’s views did not violate any central tenets of Pharisaism; he was now a ‘Pharisee plus,’ who taught that the resurrection had already been inaugurated in Jesus.” For Paul, Jesus grounded that faith in history and made it real. Paul’s appeal to the common ground he shared with the Pharisees put them in an awkward position. They agreed with him in principle (and disagreed with the Sadducees) that there would be a resurrection from the dead. But they did not want to agree with Paul that Jesus had already risen from the dead. In what ways does the risen Jesus make an otherwise abstract idea real for you? The Jewish religious leaders did not agree on which points were key to their faith. Keener found that “Pharisees taught that Sadducees had no part in the world to come, because they did not believe in life after death.” How did their internal divisions interfere with their ability to effectively pursue even goals they might have agreed on? How can a “common ground” statement like the Apostles’ Creed help us avoid similar pitfalls today?

Friday, July 13 – Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-14, 51-55. In the first part of this chapter, the apostle Paul insisted to the Christians of Corinth (some of whom were still drawn to Greek philosophy that denied Jesus' resurrection—see Acts 17:32) that Jesus' victory over death was central to their whole faith. In verses 51-55, he looked to the future. Based on Jesus' victory, he boldly proclaimed a divine victory so comprehensive that death itself would be “swallowed up,” and would be no more. In the face of death, we often use “fight” words, saying things like “she lost the battle.” Paul quoted the prophet Hosea to deny that death “wins”: “Where is your victory, Death?” (cf. Hosea 13:14) For Christians, death is not a defeat, but a transition into a new phase of our victorious walk with Christ. Does the thought of death cause you fear and anxiety? How can internalizing the message that, in Christ, death NEVER wins give you greater peace? Death does separate us from those who die, and that hurts—we miss our loved ones. But in verse 54, Paul said we'll receive a body that can't die. Thanks to Jesus, Christians know this separation is only temporary! We believe God will reunite all of God's children. Have you felt the sting of separation death causes? How does the hope that comes from Christ's victory over death help you to honor the sting of separation from those who die without letting it paralyze you?

Saturday, July 14 – Read Revelation 21:1-6, 22:1-5. God promised King David, “Your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). Isaiah wrote that God would create “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:7). And Revelation, which began with the words “A revealing of Jesus, the Messiah” (Revelation 1:1, The Message) could put those promises into the context of the risen Redeemer. Revelation ended with a glowing, symbol-laden description of the wonders that await God's people. A central symbol was God's restored gift of “the tree of life” (cf. Genesis 2:9, 3:22). Through that symbol, the book said the most glorious reward of all is that God will be with us, and we with God, throughout eternity. The apostle Paul said Christians can live very differently from those “who don't have any hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Rome hated (and sometimes killed) Christians, yet John wrote of a splendid future for God's people, using images from Genesis 2 which pictured the garden of Paradise. The exiled seer asked everyone to choose that future of “the life everlasting:” “Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift” (Revelation 22:17). Have you said yes to that invitation? Do you believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting?