

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our text for today is the Gospel, John 5:25-29. I call your attention to verse 28:

*“...a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...”*

The theme for today is: **“When the Militant Becomes the Triumphant”**

More specifically, you are going to hear about the time when the church militant becomes the church triumphant, or even more appropriately, as you consider that this is Saints Triumphant Sunday, you will learn about the time when the Saints Militant become the Saints Triumphant.

Now the word ‘saint’ is a word that makes most Lutherans a bit uncomfortable. We don’t pray to saints. We don’t venerate saints. The Bible tells us that is wrong. In fact, we don’t use the word ‘saint’ very often. Several years ago at a former parish we used a substantial bequest to completely renovate our church parlor which had suffered flood damage two years in a row. New carpet, new paint, new furniture, new wallpaper, all accomplished by the parlor redecorating committee, Barbara and Ruth, along with professional help from the Boston Store Furniture Gallery.

When all was said and done the committee received a thank-you note from the sales manager at the Boston Store. This manager had looked over the invoice to get the name of the purchaser, the institution, the person authorizing the purchase and got the facts a little jumbled. The message said, “Dear Barbara & Ruth, thank you for the recent purchase you made for St. Clemons Lutheran Church.” St. Clemons Lutheran Church... we all had a good laugh, but I’ve got to admit, I felt a little uncomfortable being called St. Clemons.

But that’s only because over the last two thousand years the word ‘saint’ has lost its original meaning. More often than not, when the word ‘saint’ is used today, it refers to someone who has been officially canonized by the Church of Rome.

The original meaning, the original usage of the word ‘saint’ is what we find in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul addresses his epistles to the saints at Ephesus, the saints at Philippi, the saints at Corinth, the saints at Rome. It’s not that they had VERY, VERY GOOD people in those congregations. The word ‘saint’ was used for EVERY believer. If you lived back in the first century and you were a believer in Jesus, the Apostle Paul, the Apostle John, the Apostle Peter would call you a saint, a ‘holy one.’

The word ‘saint’ is still properly used to describe believers, because through faith in Jesus, the sins of believers are washed away in the blood of Christ. Since every believer in Jesus is a saint, we call the sum total of all believers, the sum total of all saints everywhere, we call that the Holy Christian Church, the Communion (the oneness, the unity) of Saints. So if you are a believer in Jesus, you are a saint. If you are a believer, you are a member of the Communion of Saints.

But you need to know that there are two parts to the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. The first part is all believers everywhere, who are alive on this earth. That is the Church Militant or the Saints Militant. (Militant means we're still fighting the battle here on earth.) The second part is all believers who have died, who are in heaven already. That is the Church Triumphant or the Saints Triumphant. Together, these two parts, the Saints Militant and the Saints Triumphant make up the Communion of Saints. We just sang about this in hymn 551. "*Oh blest communion, (the Communion of Saints), O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, (that's the Saints Militant), they in glory shine, (that's the Saints Triumphant).*"

There will come a day, a day known as Judgment Day, when the church militant (believers on earth), all at once, will join the church triumphant (believers in heaven) and the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints will be exclusively composed of the Saints Triumphant. Today is Saints Triumphant Sunday, a day to reflect on that great day, that "yet more glorious day," the day of Judgment, and a day to reflect on the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Because in Christ Jesus, every 'saint,' every believer is taken from Death to Life. You are taken from Death to Life - not once, not twice, but three times!

Verse 24, the verse right before our text tells you about the first time. <sup>24</sup> "*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.*" Jesus says, "Whoever hears and believes (in me) has eternal life. He has crossed over from death to life." This is the first transition from death to life and it took place for many of you years ago in the waters of baptism.

The Bible tells us that we enter this world, we are born into this world with a need to be born again. Jesus said to Nicodemus (John 3:3) "*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" The Apostle Paul tells us why that is so in Ephesians 2:1 *...you were dead in your transgressions and sins...* This refers to spiritual death. And that's what all people face because all people are born lost and condemned sinners, spiritually dead. Because of this, Jesus had to come into this world to carry out God's plan of salvation. As a true human, he took the place of all humans, subjecting himself to the demands of God's law. But because he is true God, he was able to keep all of God's law perfectly. As a true human being he was able to die on the cross of Calvary. But because he is also true God, his death worked to pay the penalty for all sins.

Ephesians 2 (verses 4 & 5) *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* The moment the Holy Spirit worked faith in your heart (for most, the moment of baptism), at that moment you crossed over from spiritual death to spiritual life. And at that moment you became a saint, a holy one. Your sins were paid for in full and Christ's perfection, his holiness was credited to you through faith.

From that moment on, everything you have done, everything you will do, in faith, out of love for God and in accord with his will, God sees as a good work. In fact he says only saints, only believers can do what is good. Hebrews 11:6, *Without faith it is impossible to please God, Without faith it is impossible to do good in God's eyes.*

And so you the 'saint' go through life, trusting in Jesus alone as your savior, living your faith, doing things motivated out of love for Christ, sharing your faith with others. Then one day your life on earth draws to a close. This is the second transition from death to life. This is a transition all must face, because death comes to all. Existence on this earth is merely a pathway that leads to death and to the grave.

While on his deathbed, the great supreme court justice Oliver Wendel Holmes overheard someone ask his doctor, "Is he still among the living?" Holmes shot back, "Earth is not the land of the living. It is the land of the dying. And yes, I'm still among the dying." Death, temporal death, the separation of your soul from your body, comes to all sooner or later. Earth is the land of the dying.

But death is not something believers fear. Jesus said in John 11:25 "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...*" Through faith in Jesus, death is not the end of the line. Death is the doorway through which your soul enters into heaven. For believers in Christ, at the moment of death, your soul goes from temporal death to life in heaven.

Now life after death is not a controversial topic. Many religions teach a life after death. Many ancient religions, ancient philosophies taught that there was life after death. Even the new age religions teach a life after death. The difference is found in Jesus. He says, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" While other religions and philosophies say, "You get to heaven depending on how you lived your life here on earth," Christianity says, "You get to heaven because of what Jesus has done." Through faith in him, at the moment of death he takes your soul from death to life.

Your body, though, awaits the third transition from death to life in Christ. That's what verses 28 and 29 are talking about. <sup>28</sup> "*Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming (a time known only to God) a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice* <sup>29</sup> *and come out...* Judgment Day will come like a thief in the night. The Bible tells us that on that Great Day Jesus will suddenly appear in all his glory with all the holy angels and with the souls of the Saints Triumphant who have been dwelling in heaven since their temporal death. The souls that have been residing in hell since their temporal death will come from their place of torment and appear before Christ also.

Then the bodies of all the dead will be called out of their final resting places, the bodies of believers and the bodies of unbelievers, the bodies that had a proper burial, the bodies that had no burial at all, the bodies that were cremated, the bodies that were lost at sea, the bodies that were vaporized in explosions, the bodies that were eaten by wild animals. All who ever lived will hear his voice. Every human body that ever lived on this earth will come out of its grave at that one moment. Do you find that hard to believe?

There is an old story that is told about the famous English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday who lived in the early 1800's. One day in his lab, a careless worker dropped Faraday's prized silver cup into a vat of chemicals. The solution began to bubble and smoke and in an instant the silver cup disappeared. The worker was beside himself, but Faraday knew that although the cup was no longer visible, only its form had been changed. He poured a few chemicals into the solution and the silver precipitated, it reappeared in the bottom of the vat.

Faraday took the silver out of the solution, rinsed it and sent it to the same silversmith who'd made the original cup. Within a couple weeks the silver cup was back in its place in the lab.

If that chemist 200 years ago could gather up and precipitate the scattered molecules of the silver cup, how much easier will it be for the Almighty God, the original creator of all things, to gather the scattered elements that once made up each human being and set them in order again! At the same time every soul of every person who ever lived will be joined with its own resurrected and reconstituted body and ALL will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Remember Hebrews 11:6, *Without faith it is impossible to please God.* Without faith it is impossible to do good in God's eyes. Unbelievers, those without faith, those who could only do what is evil in God's eyes will be condemned. Body and soul together they will be sent into eternal condemnation. Verse 29, *...those who have done good...* refers to believers. They're the only ones who can do what is good in God's eyes. They're the ones who "*rise to live.*" Believers rise to be prepared for eternal life in the "*new heavens and the new earth.*"

Something special happens for believers. Believers' bodies undergo a glorious change. This is the third transition from death to life in Christ. When your dead, lifeless body again becomes the dwelling place of your soul, your body will be changed. The corruptible will put on incorruption, the mortal will put on immortality. Your body will be glorified like Jesus' own body after his resurrection.

When you have gone through the transitions from Death to Life in Christ, that's when real life really begins. You will be reunited with loved ones who have gone before you. You will be gathered together with all believers around the throne of God. You will be seated at the banquet of the Lamb as a beloved child of God, righteous, holy and sinless, a Saint Triumphant...forever!

Let us pray:

O Christ you died and yet you live, To me account your merit.

My pardon seal, my sins forgive, And cleanse me by your Spirit.

Beneath your cross I view the day When heaven and earth shall pass away.

Help me prepare to meet you. Amen.