

This week a friend of my – Liesl de Beer – gave birth to a healthy baby and posted photos galore to prove it. Congratulations! We're so glad life goes on – and looks better than ever. My oldest nephew announced that he and his wife are expecting their first baby early next year. Reason to rejoice "Hallelujah" and be glad in the gift of life received from our gracious creator and sustainer – the triune God: *And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true* . (Martin Luther in the Small Catechism 1st Article of the Apostolic Creed)

Yet – as if to counterpoint this good news - there have also been the sad messages of the loss of life amongst families of our friends, faithful brothers and sisters. Brother Jabulani Nkosi (Pella LC near Wartburg, KZN) buried his sister after a long illness last weekend in Mpumalanga, while our student Trinah Simakoloyi (Deaconess Course at LTS) yesterday (Friday 13th September) accompanied her sister to her last rest back home after she had fallen ill suddenly and died shortly afterwards in Lusaka, Zambia. We are grateful that Trinah was able to make it back home to be part of the funeral arrangements and mourning rituals thanks to the support offered by Deaconess Grace Rao (LCMS World Relief & Human Care). Post-graduate Frank Kainerugaba busy with his Masters in the theology of mission at UP heard on Thursday night that his uncle had passed away back home in Uganda even as the news of Dieter Klingenberg's fatal accident on the back-roads of Mpumalanga broke. We mourn the loss of our loved ones and commend their mourning families and relatives into God's special care. May he comfort them with the true faith in his gracious salvation and the sure hope of the resurrection of this our bodies to eternal life with him at the end of things + May he also teach all of us that we too must die, so that we may gain insight and wisdom to sing and confess with the expressive words of Martin Luther:

*Though in midst of life we be, Snares of death
surround us; Where shall we for succor flee, Lest our
foes confound us? To Thee alone, our Savior. We*

*mourn our grievous sin which hath Stirr'd the fire of
Thy fierce wrath. Holy and gracious God! Holy and
mighty God! Holy and allmerciful Savior! Thou eternal
God! Save us, Lord, from sinking In the deep and bitter
flood. Kyrie eleison.*

*Whilst in midst of death we be, Hell's grim jaws
o'ertake us; Who from such distress will free. Who
secure will make us? Thou only, Lord, canst do it! It
moves Thy tender heart to see Our great sin and
misery. Holy and gracious God! Holy and mighty God!
Holy and allmerciful Savior! Thou eternal God! Let not
hell dismay us With its deep and burning flood. Kyrie
eleison.*

*Into hell's fierce agony Sin doth headlong drive us:
Where shall we for succor flee, Who, O, who will hide
us? Thou only, blessed Saviour. Thy precious blood
was shed to win Peace and pardon for our sin. Holy
and gracious God! Holy and mighty God! Holy and
allmerciful Savior! Let us not, we pray, From the true
faith's comfort Fall in our last need away. Kyrie eleison.*

It's the great and awesome privilege and duty of called and ordained servants of the word to proclaim the good news of the gospel: "*He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'*" (Mar 16:6-7 NIV). That's the message of those white-robed messengers from on high on that first Easter morning, which has changed our world for good. Since then it is proclaimed throughout the world: "*Our Savior, Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*" (2Ti 1:10 NIV: Watchword of this 16th Sunday after Trinity) We follow suit even as we proclaim this saving gospel at the bedside of the ill, wounded and dying – or at the graveside, where our loved ones are laid to their last rest in the sure and certain hope that they too will rise again at the sound of the final trumpet, when our Lord will appear in his glory to judge both the living and the dead – or far away at the Seminary, where we are mourning in the circle of our fellow-

Seminarians even as our regular life of studying, resting, cleaning, reading and working, worship and service goes on.

The assigned sermon for tomorrow, the 16th Sunday after Trinity is based on the gospel of St. Luke the 7th chapter: *Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out-- the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people."* (Luk 7:11-16 NIV)

This history is one of three miracles Jesus performed to bring back dead to life again. The others are the daughter of Jairus and brother Lazarus of Mary & Martha (Gospel of this 16th Sunday after Trinity). Three points are highlighted:

- God creates life and preserves it.
- We suffer death with hurt and dying.
- Jesus grants resurrection and eternal life.

We receive our life as a gracious and good – yes perfect - gift from God, the creator of heaven and earth – unmerited and as a surprise and out of deep love. Just look out of the window and look at those flowers of spring, the fresh green covering trees and pastures! Just hold a little baby – or look at the joy of young and flourishing families! Its just smiles and joy and pleasant homeliness. Well at least most of the time.

Because – and we know it – we have spoilt the God-given goodness and with that the lasting and perfect joy. That's our guilt, our burden. We have to live with that. That's our original and chief sin. Read Luther's cited song again – especially the 1st verse. Death is a result of our sinfulness and profound corruption. Death is nothing natural.

It's never just neutral. It's punishment – and not just anybody's, but rather God's. That's what makes it so terrible and frightening. In his holiness, he's rightfully furious at sin and in his justified wrath destroys sin in death. If you want to see what I mean, then look at the crucified Christ, dying on the Cross. His pain and suffering is so severe, because he bears the sins of the world. That's why the biggest lights go out, the earth starts shaking down to its very foundations and everybody just tries to flee and to hide – even if there's just nowhere to go. The one, who's out to get you – is always there already. There's nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. God is not to be outrun.

So when we encounter death and dying, we reach our last resort and come to realize our helplessness and utter loss – not only for words, but anything to shore up the façade of our lives. We understand: We're not up to this. We can't stand up against the sting of death or against the mortal blows dealt by the almighty and just God. We're at our wits end and our life is nothing. That's why strong men start crying. That's why we stand in close family huddles and cling to each other to hold and support each other. We're falling – and we know it – hopeless and helpless indeed.

Jesus knows this too. He sees this. He foresaw it from the very beginning and he did something about this. Not just anything, but all for the better – his act of our salvation, his divine work of justification and liberation from sin, death and devil. That's why Paul Gerhard has taught the Church to sing of him:

*This Lamb is Christ, the soul's great Friend, The Lamb
of God, our Savior; Him God the Father chose to send
To gain for us His favor. "Go forth, My Son," the Father
saith, "And free men from the fear of death, From guilt
and condemnation. The wrath and stripes are hard to
bear, But by Thy Passion men shall share The fruit of
Thy salvation."*

*"Yea, Father, yea, most willingly I'll bear what Thou
commandest; My will conforms to Thy decree, I do
what Thou demandest." O wondrous Love, what hast
Thou done! The Father offers up His Son! The Son,*

*content, descendeth! O Love, how strong Thou art to
save! Thou beddest Him within the grave Whose word
the mountains rendeth.*

It's this very Jesus, who sees the calamity not only of that widow in Nain, but also the pain of the sisters in Bethany and of the parents in Capernaum. It's he, who stops the wailing of the mourners and changes the weeping into laughter. Yes, first it's unbelieving and bitter, but afterwards it's the rejoicing laughter of those freed from the fear of death and dying. The parents receive back their daughter cured and capable of serving them as before. Just by speaking words of life: "*Talitha kumi!*" With this authority over life and death he stops the bearers of the bier in their tracks as they are leaving town and ready to bury the dead body outside the boundaries of life. He feels for the mother and bids her to stop crying and gives her back her son – alive by speaking his authoritative word: "*Young man, I say to you, get up!*" He does so – just like Lazarus, who's buried for days already and has started to rot and to smell. No doubt – he's dead, he's gone, he's beyond the point of having just gone out a bit. That's to address our doubts and secret suspicion that Jesus could only raise those who were not quite dead. Something like half-dead. Well, Jesus calls him, who's well beyond the point of no-return and calls him back to life: "*Lazarus – come out!*" And speaking just this one word, his friend is healed and brought back to life. That's the creator and savior Jesus Christ at work. No doubt, he's in control of life and death. He holds the keys to these in his hand and after his victorious resurrection from his vicarious death on the 3rd day, after his triumphant harrowing of hell and overwhelming the devil and binding him and all evil for good, he proclaims the wonderful way forward to his disciples and church: "*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*" And with that he breathed on them and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*" (Joh 20:21-23 NIV) Since then his church carries out his mission to the very ends of the earth making disciples of his in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and preaching the saving gospel just as he himself taught us. (cf Mt. 28:18ff and Mk.16:16) Baptizing them into the death of the Son, so

that they too like he may come out and live in a new life righteous and holy by the power of the Holy Spirit as is pleasing to the Father (Cf. Rom. 6,4). Going to bed every night in the knowledge that it might be our last, but rising up again in the faith and hope that we are to live by his grace and in his abiding presence now and for ever. Going to his table to be fed with the food of immortality – his most holy and precious body and blood given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins and to partake in his everlasting life, grace and goodness already in faith and hope as we look forward to the life beyond death which will be better by far of everything we know in this life because it will be free of sin and the pursuit of vanity and all limitations by ageing, death and dying. We know that we are moving towards death, but it has lost its sting. It's no more our final demise, but rather a rest and soft cushion before we get to see our living Lord at last and the fulfillment of all his glorious promises. We're no longer damned to be separated from God through death, but rather in Jesus Christ are united with him as the source of life forever: He's our all in all. God himself has come to help and save us – for good! Not just as a return to a life as we know it, but rather out of this world. That's why we continue to sing with Paul Gerhard even as we face death and carry our loved ones to be buried and stand at their closed graves:

*From morn till eve my theme shall be Thy mercy's
wondrous measure; To sacrifice myself for Thee Shall
be my aim and pleasure. My stream of life shall ever be
A current flowing ceaselessly, Thy constant praise
outpouring. I'll treasure in my memory, O Lord, all
Thou hast done for me, Thy gracious love adoring.*

*Of death I am no more afraid, New life from Thee is
flowing; Thy cross affords me cooling shade When
noonday's sun is glowing. When by my grief I am
oppressed, On Thee my weary soul shall rest Serenely
as on pillows. Thou art my Anchor when by woe My
bark is driven to and fro On trouble's surging billows.*

*And when Thy glory I shall see And taste Thy
kingdom's pleasure, Thy blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure. When I appear before Thy*

*throne, Thy righteousness shall be my crown— With
these I need not hide me. And there, in garments
richly wrought As Thine own bride, I shall be brought
To stand in joy beside Thee.*

Yes, we believe, teach and confess with the holy Christian Church: “the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” – even as bury our loved ones – parents, husbands and wives, sons and daughters even. That’s why we can sing truth- and faithfully with Simon Dach (1605-1659):

*Oh, how blest are ye whose toils are ended! Who, through
death, have unto God ascended! Ye have arisen From the
cares which keep us still in prison.*

*We are still as in a dungeon living, Still oppressed with
sorrow and misgiving; Our undertakings Are but toils, and
troubles, and heart-breakings.*

*Ye meanwhile, are in your chambers sleeping, Quiet, and
set free from all our weeping; No cross nor trial Hinders
your enjoyments with denial.*

*Christ has wiped away your tears for ever; Ye have that for
which we still endeavor. To you are chanted Songs which
yet no mortal ear have haunted.*

*Ah! who would not, then, depart with gladness, To inherit
Heaven for earthly sadness? Who here would languish
Longer in bewailing and in anguish?*

*Come, O Christ, and loose the chains that bind us! Lead us
forth, and cast this world behind us! With Thee, the
Anointed, Finds the soul its joy and rest appointed. Amen.*