

## HOW DO PEOPLE DO IT WITHOUT THE LORD?

It was about ten days ago, now, and I stared into Ruth's Schiefelbein's eyes as she lay in her hospital bed. We both knew where things were headed, that in a matter of days – hours probably, Ruth was going to close her eyes for the last time on this earth. And, of course, that meant, for her, that she was going to take the journey into the great unknown – to face her future, and her Lord.

As often happens when someone is facing these last moments, she and I had a little time alone. Sometimes in these minutes I do a lot of the talking – sharing Scripture, praying, offering words of hope and comfort. And I did some of that, for sure. But on this day, Ruth wanted to talk; and so, in a move that's sometimes hard for a preacher, I shut my mouth.

And here's what she said, "How do people do it without the Lord? Where do they find comfort? Where do they find joy? Where do they find hope? I've spent 91 years trusting in my Savior, and He has been so good to me – always there, always working things out – always blessing me. I've wondered, often, exactly what heaven's going to be like, but I'm not afraid because I know that Jesus is there."

Minutes later, Ruth's whole family surrounded her and we took the time to sing a few songs as we shared a devotion together: What a Friend we Have in Jesus. Beautiful Savior. Praise God from whom all Blessings Flow. And I looked at Ruth and saw in her eyes, not fear, but joy. Not anxiety, but confidence. She saw, in that moment of tears, the fullness of her life and was ready to keep going to the next great thing that God had in store for her.

Eyes. They're a window to the soul. And Ruth's eyes showed resignation to the next place Jesus would lead her. She was comfortable that the Savior who had been her companion through life, would also be with her on this next journey. As He Himself said, "In my Father's house are many rooms. I go there to prepare a place for you. Lo, I am with you always. Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."

And so Ruth had joy – a contentment that defies logic -- even as she was saying goodbye to the people she loved the most – even though her body was succumbing to its physical weakness -- because Ruth knew that with Jesus there is always joy.

But I want to go back to Ruth's question and pose it to you. "How do people do it without the Lord? How do they?"

And my answer to you is this: I don't know. But I'm glad I'm not. Cause, as I look about, I can't help but notice that we live in a world of turmoil and strife – a world, as I said on Thursday and Friday, that is filled with guilt and shame as sin continues to wreak havoc on us.

If the eyes are a window to the soul, then the Evening News is a window to our world. And every day it's a different crisis: political wrangling, accusations and lies – abuse and mistreatment that happens between people, -- war, crime, shootings, natural disasters, human rights violations, sickness, disease, hunger and fear, poverty and death. So often it's chaos out there. It's like a cyclone, out of control. And people are looking for something to hang onto – to give meaning and purpose to the daily grind.

Let me share a story I've told you before. It's back in 1985 and I'm trying to impress my bride-to-be with my canoe skills on the Housatonic River in Connecticut. I think I know how to deal with the rapids as we pass under the covered bridge in Cornwall, but in just a few seconds I have flipped the canoe and we are floating down the river getting pummeled in the back by rocks. For the record, Amy's a much better swimmer than I am.

Anyway, somehow, in my foolishness, I thought that the smart thing to do would be to grab hold of my canoe and hang onto it. Turns out this is a stupid thing to do cause you can get trapped under the canoe and cause yourself great danger. And, by the way, you're not anchored on anything when you grab the canoe. So, in the end, you find yourself floundering through the water with nothing.

I sorta think that's the way it is with people who don't know Jesus. They try to grab hold of things, but they just don't last. Maybe in their career. Maybe in their family. Maybe their possessions. Maybe in their pursuit of pleasure? Any of those might be good enough to bring some temporary joy – some up-and-down happiness.

But in the end, over time, we find that they all are laden with disappointment. Because, in truth, none of those things lasts forever. Your job will someday have someone else in your position. Family separates and death has it's way. Possessions pass, pleasure is fleeting.

It's a bit like the fads and fashions of the past. Remember these? Pet rocks, lava lamps, Angry Birds, Hot Wheels, pogs, poodle skirts, Weebles, the Rachel haircut, jelly shoes, mood rings, Rubik's cube, My Little Pony – the list could go on and on. My personal favorite: the Polyester Leisure Suit. There was a winner! We all know that these things eventually have a natural. And so do the things of this world.

And if that's where we put our hope, we will often find ourselves sorely disappointed.

St. Paul puts it this way in our text: "If only for THIS life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

As one who thought he had life all figured out when he was a Pharisee, Paul recognizes the utter futility of anchoring on the things that do not last. It's like running endlessly on a gerbil wheel, or giving all our power and energy trying to grab a handful of air. .

But Paul doesn't stop there. Look at the rest of the text.

20But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

The tomb of Jesus represented a critical juncture in time for the disciples. Either Jesus was just like everyone else and His message was a fading flash in the pan – or Jesus was exactly who He said He was and is worthy of trust. Either He was just another human who succumbed to death, or He was the Eternal Son of God on whom all people can stake our claim.

When the women in the Gospel Lesson come back to tell the men what they heard from the angels, the text tells us that the disciples first believed the former of these: that Jesus was just another man who died. It says, the women's words about resurrection seemed like nonsense. A pipedream. A fairy tale. After all, they saw Him die. And death is always the end.

Isn't it?

But soon, very soon, as His blood-stained, wounded hands open before them and His living, breathing body declares, “Peace be with you” they realize that He is the real deal. And they are ready to stake their claim with him.

And the next thing you know, it’s the book of Acts, and they are out in the world, facing every sort of danger, so that that can share with others that there is One who can bring lasting hope and their joy. One who is worthy of all glory, honor and praise.

For Jesus is God. Jesus paid the price for sins. Jesus opens the gates of heaven. And He did it all purely out of love for you – as a free gift.

Some years ago, I remembered reading a poem by Elizabeth Cheney. It was entitled, “The Robin and the Sparrow” and went like this:

Said the robin to the sparrow,  
“I should really like to know,  
Why these anxious human beings  
Rush about and worry so.”  
Said the sparrow to the robin,  
“Friend I think that it must be,  
That they have no Heavenly Father,  
Such as cares for you and me.”

If we’re really a people anchored on the truth of a Savior who paid the price for all our sins and rose from the grave in glorious triumph, then why indeed to we flutter around so much? Do we really believe it?

At Ruth’s funeral, a Saturday ago, I shared with the attendees that Ruth and Ed, a few years ago, donated some lights to illumine our beautiful window here during night services. They wanted the light of Christ to shine through that window, which to me represents Christ on the cross, whether it was a beautiful sunny day, or a dark and lonely night.

In a way, isn’t that who we’re called to be – like those lights!? Anchored on the resurrection, we know, as Ruth declared in her faithful confession, that “God has been so good to us – always there, always working things out – always blessing us. And so, we’re not afraid because we know that Jesus is with us. And one day, He will take us to be where He is.

Cause He is risen, just as He said. And, as we trust in Him, nothing can separate us from His love.