

Picture yourself back in the year 50 in grief because someone you love has died. You live in Thessalonika up in northeastern Greece. You heard Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy first hand as they preached about Jesus. They told you he rose from the dead and he promised to come back. You were baptized together with your family and friends, and you expect Jesus any day now to stand before you just as Paul had. But something else happens. One of your friends dies. Then another one dies. Jesus is taking longer than you thought. You begin to wonder, "Now what? When Jesus does come back, are my dead friends doomed? Have they lost all hope? Will we live with Jesus forever, but without them?" Those were the questions Paul received and to which he responded in today's second reading.

Remember Lazarus? When Lazarus was dying his family sent for Jesus, but he arrived late -- didn't get there for four days. He finally raised Lazarus from the dead, but he sure put a scare into people.

Catholics today also have questions about the dead. Do we still believe in purgatory? Does it do any good to pray for the dead? Are we living in the end times? What we believe is based on passages like this one from Paul.

The most important starting place to answer these questions is the place where Paul begins. He writes, "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." On this foundation stands Christian belief. Jesus is risen. His resurrection demonstrates that God will also raise the faithful from the dead. That's the ground on which everything stands.

What about people who die before Jesus comes back? Paul says, "Relax." They will enjoy the resurrection even if they die before the second coming. Paul writes, "we who are alive will by no means precede those who have died." Purgatory? It's in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. We don't know what purgatory looks like or feels like. The point is in some way we pay for the crimes we commit. Our God is just. Forgiving, but just. Are we living in the end times? Yes, and we have been for 2000 years. Ever since the ascension of Jesus we have been awaiting his return. We need to be ready at any moment for the coming of Christ or for our own personal death.

Whenever we recite the creed, we state our belief that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. That statement has today's passage in the background. Some will be living and some will be dead at the judgment, but Christ will judge us all. Paul envisions that the dead will be judged first and then the living. Judgment will inspect our belief and our conduct. Our attitude toward our neighbor will disclose our cooperation with the grace of God's love.

So as we await that glorious day, we devote each day to faithful discipleship. We also pray for the dead, that God may show mercy on them. And we look to the day when we will all stand together in the eternal blessedness of divine light.