From the Chapel

A Reflection on the Life and Faith of Gary Greenfield

This Chapel message was presented by Dr. John E. Bauer on April 22, 2004.

Theme: “Faith through the Spirit”
Text: Psalm 16

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is an accomplished fact. It is the one historical event that binds together all Christians. And it is faith in the risen Savior that gives us confidence that we too will be raised from the dead. This faith in the resurrected Lord is a gift of the Holy Spirit that guards our hearts and our minds as we live in joyful thanksgiving and ultimately face our own deaths.

Psalm 16 speaks with such confidence. The writer, presumably David, acknowledges that God delivers the faithful. In the immediate sense, David is confident that God will keep him safe from his enemies. But David is also sure that God will keep him safe and preserve him from an untimely death. Furthermore, our understanding of the psalm from the perspective of the apostle Peter in Acts 2—in which Peter quotes the second half of this psalm to provide Old Testament prophecy to corroborate Jesus’ resurrection—clearly states that God would not permit his faithful one (David) nor his Holy One (Jesus) to see decay. To be sure, David died as Peter states. But using Psalm 16 as a kind of parallel prophecy (consistent with Hebrew logic), Peter establishes the fulfillment of the prophecy in Jesus’ resurrection. David would be delivered from danger and death, would be preserved to eternal life, because to a far greater degree than the way in which David was preserved, Jesus would overcome death, would be kept from corruption and decay, would rise from the dead—and thereby would guarantee our own resurrection.

Well, enough about that. As important as this psalm is to us as a reinforcement of the Easter message, I’d rather talk about something else that is on my heart and mind.

What I really want to talk about today is one of the best friends I have ever had in my life. I went to visit him yesterday. He is struggling with a very serious form of cancer. The energetic and vibrant man I have known for more than 25 years has become mostly homebound. We don’t know if the Lord will restore him to health, or if the cancer will significantly shorten his life. As you can imagine, we continue to pray that God will heal him. My friend is our retired president, Gary Greenfield.

I want to share with you the substance of a conversation I had with Gary last fall. He was feeling well enough last October that we spent a day riding around southeastern Wisconsin on our Harleys. He was so happy to be able to ride again after six months of very intense and debilitating chemotherapy. We stopped for a sandwich in a little coffee shop in Hartford. As we sat there, he told me about his hope for recovery, and about the spiritual encouragement he had received from many friends. He talked about his fear that his faith would not be strong enough to withstand temptation if the Lord would determine that he shouldn’t survive the cancer. We talked for a long time about what it means to face death, and about what it means to believe that through death we will be able to live forever with Jesus. He said he couldn’t imagine going through something like this and not being a Christian. I kept thinking to myself that I couldn’t possibly imagine what it must be like to live day after day not knowing if you are going to live or die.

My visits with Gary have impressed on me that we are all terminally ill. We are going to die. We all have a fatal condition that will lead to our deaths. That sickness, that cancer, is sin. And because of sin, we have no hope of beating the illness. We cannot escape the terminal nature of our disease.
But what has kept Gary safe, what has given him refuge, is his strong faith in Jesus as the one who has conquered death. Gary believes the Easter message. And because Jesus’ resurrection is a certainty in his mind, Gary can face his condition with the confidence that whatever happens, he is safe and secure in the loving arms of his Savior.

I realize this may sound like a eulogy. That certainly is not my intent. The Lord may grant him recovery and a longer life, or the Lord may take him home sooner than any of us would have thought. But isn’t it the same way with us? We say with David, “Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup.” Our times are in his hands. He will call us home at the appointed time. It could be today, next year, or 50 years from now.

But isn’t it interesting how many ways we find to avoid thinking about that? When people are young, they live with the hopes and expectations of a long life lying before them. When people get to be my age, we tend to think more about enjoying some of the creature comforts that a life of hard work has earned for us. And even when we get to be quite old, it is common to stubbornly cling to life by refusing to concede that we can’t do everything we once did.

When I read Psalm 16, I couldn’t help but think about how Gary is confronting his own mortality. He expresses his faith in the risen and ascended Lord Jesus and knows with certainty that he will live with him forever. His conversation is filled with expressions of confidence in God his Savior. And so, I know that Gary would say to you, just as David said in the Psalm:

I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

May God give to all of us a faith that holds securely to the promise of the resurrection to life eternal with Jesus our Savior.

(Gary J. Greenfield entered eternal life on August 17, 2004. In his final days, Gary continued to express his Christian faith and his eagerness to be with Jesus in heaven. He will be greatly missed.)

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Memorials

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