

Today we have gathered here in Immanuel's sanctuary in the presence of God to continue to grieve the loss, yet also to give thanks to God for the life of Maxine Bals. Each one of us has come here today with a variety of memories and stories about Maxine. We bring memories and stories which we've shared with one another the past several days, stories which help all of us remember those things which were unique to Maxine and made her who she was.

As Maxine's pastor, I have only a glimpse into her life, as I only knew her over the past few years. What I knew about her, as we would visit about different things, were some generalities, and also some specifics. I knew that she loved country music, but I couldn't tell you what her favorite song was. I knew that she had a fairly big family, with lots of grandkids and great-grandchildren, and that she did her best to keep track of all of them, because she loved them dearly. I knew she went down to Columbus to the horse track to try her luck a few times, and that she enjoyed being able to get out and be active when her health and energy allowed her to do so. I knew that, while we were visiting, there would be at least a few times over the course of a visit when she'd change a story she was telling ever so slightly in order to turn what she was talking about into something funny, and then she'd get this sly smile across her face as I'd be laughing at what she just said. I remember that happening a lot over the past few years, but for some reason, I can only remember one specific example of that today. And that example comes from when she was in the hospital a little over a week ago, on Palm Sunday, and I was called to come over and visit with her and the family gathered around. She was talking about what had happened to her, and she said something like, "The nurse couldn't find a vein to get the IV started, so they had to call in the Air Force." I had to ask her, "What? The Air Force?" "Yes," she replied. "They had to call in the helicopter crew to put in the IV." You know, it was just subtle changes like that, that she would make in her conversations with me, that would bring a smile to my face, and it'd bring a smile to hers, too.

There were also several things that she said or did that made me know that her faith in the Triune God was important to her. When she had some more energy, and was able to get out of the house more frequently, she'd be here on Sunday mornings for worship, and she was so glad that she was able to come and hear God's Word and to know God's love and forgiveness for her and for everyone. And whenever she had a new great-grand-baby, she'd tell me, "I've got another new great-grandbaby that we need to get baptized. Will you be able to do that?" Her faith was important to her, and she wanted it to be important to everyone in her family, from

the oldest, to the youngest. Maxine prayed for her family and for other things in her life every night. She told me that she had to pray every night, otherwise she couldn't fall asleep. She admitted that, on some nights, she fell asleep *while* she was praying, and she said that she felt kinda bad for not holding up her side of the conversation with God on those nights, but I told her that that was okay, and that was just God giving her the rest that she needed, and that God was glad to hear what she did pray for, and that God knew the rest of the details, even if she didn't get them prayed. Prayer was important to Maxine, and so was Holy Communion. When she was at home and didn't quite have the energy to make it over to church the past few months, she gave me a call to have me come and visit her, and she also made a point to say, "I'd be nice if you would bring communion, too." In the bread and wine of our Lord's Supper, Maxine knew that her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ loves her and loves the entire world so much that Jesus gave up his body and his blood on the cross so that all of our sins would be forgiven, and so that we might live in the presence of the Triune God forever, both in this life, and in the life to come.

These are some of the memories of Maxine that I bring today. You all bring many stories about Maxine with you today, and you also bring memories and emotions that you will never really be able to truly share, because you hold them from the unique position of the relationship you had with Maxine. You hold memories of her as wife, mom, grandma, great-grandma, sister, aunt, neighbor, friend, or fellow follower of Christ. The feelings that you have for Maxine in those relationships are feelings that are unique to you, feelings that might never be fully expressed in words. Today, we all come with a variety of feelings. Some of these feelings we are able to talk about, and some are so overwhelming that we are at a complete loss for words and have only sighs and tears left to express how we truly feel at the loss of Maxine.

The strongest feelings from this past week that still are with us today have been sadness, loss, and sorrow. None of us were wanting Maxine to die any time soon. There were still so many things for her to live for. She had wanted to live to the nice round age of 80. Bob and her were going to be celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary next Thursday, on April 3. Her family is still growing, as more great-grandbabies are on the way. Her chemo treatments had seemed to be treating her cancer as well as expected. (Sigh)...Why, why, why? Why did she have to die now, Lord? Why did she die now, when it just doesn't seem like the right time to us? Maxine's son Bobbie said it like it was Wednesday night at the hospital, when we had a feeling things

were turning for the worse. He said, “This sucks.” He hit the nail right on the head. It is one of the worst feelings, if not *the* worst feeling in the world, to watch someone you love die.

“The wages of sin is death,” the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, at the end of the 6th chapter. When humans sin, what we earn is death. What is sin? Sin is actions that lead to brokenness, especially actions that lead to a broken relationship with God, and broken relationships with others. As Maxine’s daughter Gail said a few times this past week, “It’s all Adam and Eve’s fault.” It’s true, the first humans sinned, when they did what God told them not to do, but you know what? You and I, these many thousands of years later, we sin, too. We sin, both knowingly and unknowingly. It’s part of the human condition. Not that we should use that as an excuse to keep on sinning, to keep on breaking relationships with God and with others. We shouldn’t sin, because our Lord Jesus calls us to live a sinless life, but time and time again, no matter how hard we try, we fail to live that sinless life. Once human sin entered into God’s creation, it’s like a drop of food coloring fell into a crystal clear glass of water. When you put a drop of food coloring into a clear glass of water, eventually, the whole glass turns that shade of color. Sin is pervasive in our world, it’s all around us, even if we ourselves try our hardest not to sin. Sin breaks relationships, and that brokenness leads to our death. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul writes.

But Paul doesn’t stop there. The whole sentence reads like this. Paul writes, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” There is hope for Maxine, even though she has died. There is hope for us, in our grief now, and for when we will die someday, too. There is hope, because we have been given a promise from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We who follow and trust in Jesus Christ have the promise of the grace of God. God’s grace is a free gift. We can’t buy God’s grace or earn it or do good deeds for it. God’s grace comes to us in Jesus Christ while we are still sinners, and that grace forgives all our sins and grants us eternal life. God acts first, by coming into this world in our human flesh in Jesus Christ, showering us with God’s grace and love, and what we do, is we respond to that love. We believe in God’s love, and trust in it, because time and time again, throughout history, God has revealed Himself as worthy of our trust.

Psalm 91, which you heard me read here today, is a beautiful Psalm which tells us and tells the world why it is good to trust in God. God is our refuge and fortress. God delivers us from snares and deadly

pestilence. God covers us with his wings, and under those wings, we find refuge.

Maxine reflected this particular attitude and way of God in her own life. The Psalm talks about God as having wings of protection. Maxine had these kind of wings, too. I know that her daughter Deb, and others of you, too, have described Maxine as a mother hen, who would gather her family close to her and take care of you, to protect you and steer you down paths that she knew were God's ways. She'd try to gather you to trust in the Lord, because even though life gets rough and bad things may happen to us, the Lord is where we find our refuge and strength. God ensures that, in the end, we will not be left alone. The end of Psalm 91 tells us that the Lord says, "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation."

We need God's salvation because we need to be saved from sin, death, and the devil. We need to be saved from brokenness and restored to wholeness. Jesus Christ is the one who does this. Jesus came into the world to teach us how to live, and he came to show us that God loves us so very much. God the Father loves us so much that he sent his only Son into this world, so that we might see how far God will go to save us and get us turned back to him. Jesus came, and died one of the most horrible deaths that a person can die. He came and died on a cross. On the cross, Jesus dies for us and with us so that we might never die alone.

I have preached that sentence many times in my life, that Jesus dies for us and with us so that we might never die alone, but only once in my life, so far, have I actually seen something with my own eyes that reveals the truth of that sentence. And what I saw, happened last Friday. Because last Friday was Good Friday, the day we solemnly celebrate the fact that Jesus died for us and for the sins of the world. "Jesus dies for us and with us so that we might never die alone." Wouldn't you know it? Maxine died about 3:20 p.m. on Friday, about 20 minutes after Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels tell us that Jesus died on that Good Friday long ago. Do you see the connection? On the day that Maxine died, the whole church recognizes that Jesus died. Jesus died for Maxine and *with* Maxine, so that she would *never* die alone.

The gospel lesson that we heard today isn't a "normal" gospel lesson you'd hear at a funeral service. Usually, we hear something from the Gospel of John. Sometimes we hear where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and

believes in me will never die.” That’s a good verse to hear Jesus say to us when we’re grieving the loss of a loved one. Another “usual” gospel lesson you might hear at a memorial service is when Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house, there are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and I will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going, because I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.” Again, those are good verses to hear when we are mourning the death of a loved one.

But today, with the help of some family members, we’ve chosen to listen to something a little different. We’ve chosen to listen to Jesus tell us a little more clearly about the Way that Jesus walks, and the Way that Jesus calls us to follow. Jesus calls us, together with the crowd and his disciples, and he lays it all out there for us. He says, “If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me. If you want to save your life all by yourself, you are going to lose it. But if you lose your life for me—Jesus, and if you lose your life for the sake of the good news of God, then THAT’S when you are going to save it. What’s it going to profit you to gain the whole world and all the stuff that is in it, if you are going to lose your life? Indeed, what can you give in return for your life?”

In these verses, we hear Jesus telling his disciples and telling us what it means to follow him. It isn't going to be an easy walk in the park. It's going to be tough. From what I've gathered from listening to all of you the past week, things weren't always easy for Maxine or your family. Things got tough, especially as Maxine battled cancer over the years, and when Carol died, and probably a lot of other tough things, too. Maxine took up her cross and she carried these burdens as she followed Jesus and kept her faith in God. And as she did that, often times, Deb said that she gave up things she could have done for herself. She made sacrifices so that her family members could have some good things in life. She gave up things in her life for you all, and in doing so, she shared the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ with you, even if she didn't ever say it in that kind of way. Did Maxine build up a massive amount of wealth to serve her own needs? No. But she did built up a family full of people for God, and she tried her best to kept them together, and she tried her best to love them, so that they might love one another with Christ's love. What could Maxine give in return for her life? Nothing. Everything we have is given to us from God out of grace, entrusted to us to care for and to love while we are

here, and after we leave this earth, it's for someone else to care for. Grace is something God gives freely out of love, and it is never given because we earned it or deserve it. It's given because God loves us so very much. God loves Maxine, and God loves us. In her death, God gives Maxine the grace of eternal life, and we, too, look forward to that gift when we will die and we will see God, and we will see our loved ones face-to-face once again.

We don't rush to our death in order for these things to happen. We continue to live our lives, trusting in God, because God has given us our lives out of love, and God wants nothing more for us than for us to live an abundant life. God is a lover of life. God does not love death. If God the Father didn't despise death, he wouldn't have sent Jesus to battle and defeat death on the cross for us. God defeats death, and God loves us so much that he offers eternal life to Maxine and to all of us who follow and believe in Jesus.

In the midst of our grief, we know the joy of God. We know that God loves us and God loves Maxine. We know that God gives Maxine eternal life, and God will grant us eternal life. As it says in Psalm 73, verse 26, which is on the front of our worship bulletins, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." Although her flesh and her heart may have failed, Maxine trusted in the promise and love of God to the end, and now, she's as free as the dove on the front of our bulletins. No more cancer, no more pain, no more suffering. She's free to be with Jesus, in the heavenly courts of God. We're going to miss her, but we know that she's safe in the gracious and loving arms of God. For this, we give you thanks, Gracious Father, as we continue to pray to you, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen