

# Natural Burial



## The Final Journey

A Six-Week Bible Study



Dr. Beth Hoeltke is director of the Graduate School at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where she serves to advise and supervise its students, oversee the components of graduate education, and promote academic quality and integrity. She has served in this role since 2016.



Dr. Kent J. Burreson is the Louis A. Fincke and Anna B. Shine Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. A Seminary faculty member since 2000, he is an associate professor of Systematic Theology and dean of the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus. He teaches courses on the confessions, systematics, religious bodies, Byzantine theology and many different courses in worship.

Graphic design by XiaoPei Chen  
Cover art provided by Sarah Armbrust

©2019 by Rev. Dr. Kent Burreson and Dr. Beth Hoeltke. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior written permission of the authors.

**Natural Burial**  
**The Final Journey**  
**A Six-Week Bible Study**

# Week 1

---

## Honoring the Body: Hope for the Christian



## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions  
and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)

# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, when you died on the cross your body was left to hang there in view of the whole world. Your body was stained with blood, dirt, and sweat. While alive, your body was loved and cared for by many. Now alone it hangs on display soiled by humankind's sin. Rejected, stained, and dead. But that same body was also loved and cherished by many. "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 42:43). When permission was granted, "He bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb" (Mark 42:46). Lord, help me to love the body of my Christian brother or sister in a similar fashion, both in life and in death. Help me to honor the God created from the dust of the earth. Amen.



## Contemplation

Each week we will include at least one photo that we would like you to spend a couple minutes contemplating. Look at the photo with an open mind and, as a group or individually, briefly discuss its impact.

*Questions to help guide contemplation:* How does the image above impact your thinking? What are the first things that stand out? Is your attention directed to Christ's sacrifice or does it make you think about death itself? What do you notice now that you didn't notice at first?

# Introductory Video

Click on the link below to view the introductory video. Once you have viewed the video work through the group questions below to prepare you for this week's study.



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/1>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion

- 1** When was the last time you thought about Christ's death?  
How about your spouse's or parent's death? How about your own death?
- 2** How do we honor Christ's body? The entire body of Christ?  
Our neighbor's body? Our own body?
- 3** Consider Paul's comment to the Philippians, "That Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." What might that mean?



# Bible Connections

God cares for your body and personally knows your body. He knows you intimately. Before you were even born, he knew you. Your body is important to God. When you were washed in the waters of baptism you joined Christ in both death and resurrection. You matter. I think we often miss this critical and important thought, that the Creator of the world knows you, loves you, and cares deeply for you. The God who formed the stars and skies, the entire universe, took the time to form you in the womb of your mother. Read the text of Jeremiah 1:5 out loud. Let the words wash over you, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Listen again to the verbs in that simple sentence, God formed you, knew you, consecrated you, all before you were born. That is absolutely amazing and extremely humbling.

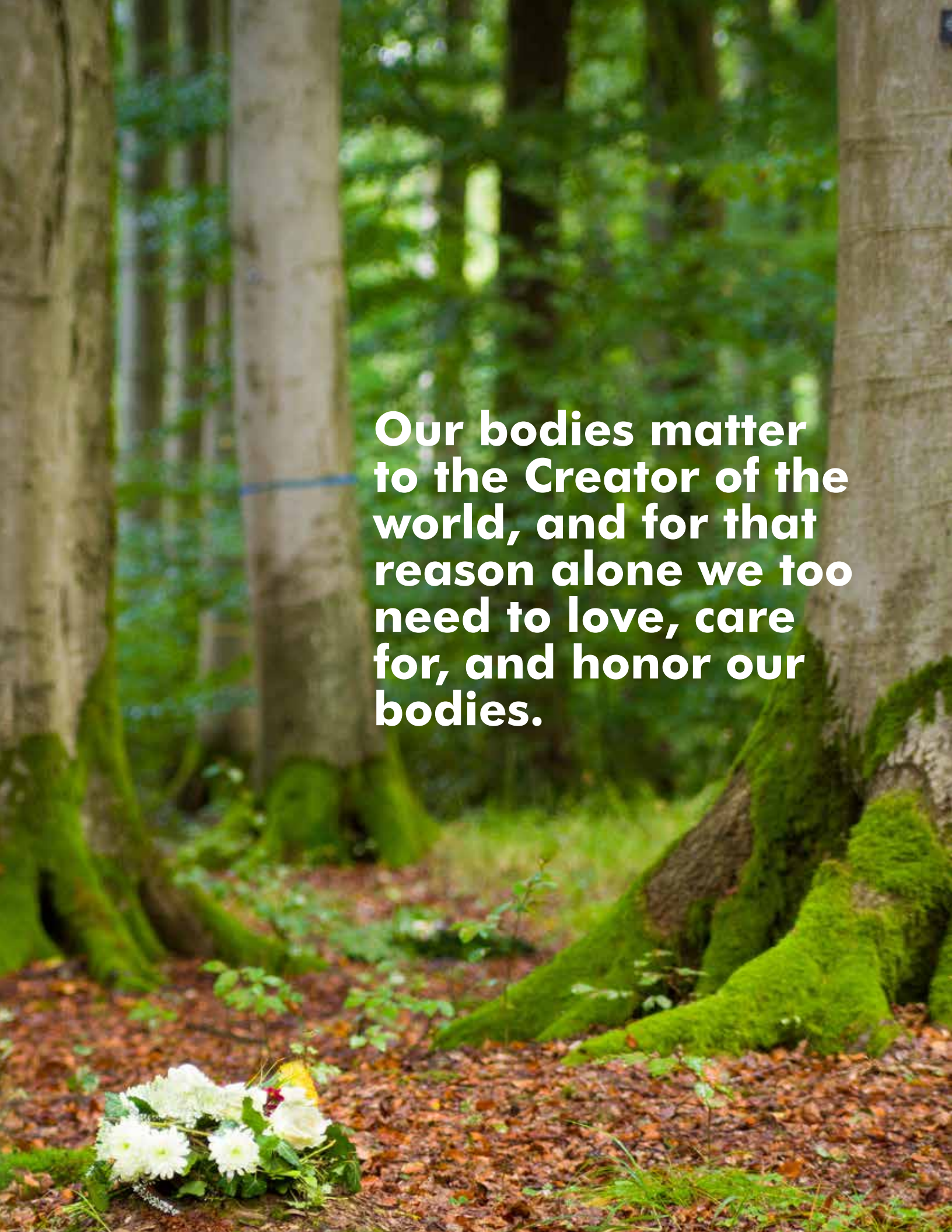
Our bodies matter to the Creator of the world, and for that reason alone we too need to love, care for, and honor our bodies. Psalm 139:13 talks about God taking the time to create and form every part of us. The psalmist uses the phrase “knitted me together.” “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.” Think for a minute about what’s involved in knitting, “knit two, purl two, knit one, purl one, knit two, purl one,” etc. There is a rhythm and concentration that goes hand in hand with knitting and God did that with your body. God thinks about even the minutest of things, right down to the number of hairs on your head. “But even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30).

Psalm 119:73 talks about the Creator’s hands making and fashioning us, “Your hands have made and fashioned me.” When I hear texts like this an image of a potter with clay comes to mind. Potters have this amazing connection to the clay as they slowly mold and shape it from this unrecognizable glob into an amazing piece of pottery or art. It takes time, patience, and yes, love to create this way, but our God does this with each and every one of us as he molds and creates our bodies.

## Questions to discuss:

- What other scripture texts come to mind when we think about the importance God places on the body?
- How does God honor our bodies?
- How can we, in return, honor our bodies and also the bodies of our loved ones and fellow Christians?



A photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, a bouquet of white flowers with green leaves and a small red flower lies on a bed of brown fallen leaves. The background shows several tree trunks and large, moss-covered tree roots. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Our bodies matter  
to the Creator of the  
world, and for that  
reason alone we too  
need to love, care  
for, and honor our  
bodies.**

# Digging In

In the book Dr. Burreson and I recently released, *Death, Heaven, Resurrection and the New Creation*, we bring the subject of death to life (pun intended!). We focus on the importance of the body, both now, at death, and at the resurrection in the new creation. In this Bible study, we will take a look at how the church, as individuals and as a whole, can participate in the caring of the body of our loved ones once death has come. We will discuss the journey of the body, caring and preparing the body for its burial, the importance of the body being present at the funeral, the family's involvement in committing the body to the ground at burial, and finally the raising of the body on the last day.

In light of today's burial practices all this may seem a bit strange, but it wasn't more than 100 years ago that all of this was the family's responsibility. With the assistance of the pastor and possibly an undertaker or death midwife, the family would prepare the body for its burial. More than likely, they would have been involved in every step of the process. This Bible study introduces you to the beauty of caring for our loved ones, not only in this life, but also as we escort them, or journey with them, toward eternal life. The more we learned about what today is known as natural burial the more we believed it entailed important practices for the burial of our Christian brothers and sisters and for the Christian community as a whole. But before we get too far along, let's take a look at the body's importance from a Christian perspective.

Foremost, we need to recognize whether Christian or not, God the Creator of the universe gifted each of us with life. Our life is literally a gift from God. Think about that reality. Reflect on the texts we looked at above. God kneeled in his creation and used the mud of the earth, to create Adam. Here is a physical image of the Creator molding and creating the first man. With love and precision he creates. Then, with that same love and precision he puts the man to sleep and creates or builds the woman from the flesh of the man. That is intimate, that is love. If that is not intimate enough, God then breathes life into our very being. Genesis 2:7, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Without God's breath life cannot exist. But it doesn't end there.

When we are brought to the baptismal font, we are again, through God's grace, filled with the breath of life. In our baptism, the old Adam in us is drowned in order to bring us to new life in Christ. We die in order to live a new life. Baptism is not just a symbol. It is a killing and a making alive. God takes our body, kills the old Adam, and creates the new Adam.

It's important to remember our baptism as we begin this Bible study on natural burial. Why? Because baptism is where our true life in Christ begins, in the water and words of the baptismal sacrament. But death is also where true life begins. Death was conquered in Christ's dying. Death no longer has dominion over us. So when we die, we enter eternal life with Christ. And when Christ makes his final return, we will live with him in the new creation. This is the beginning of true life.

## Pause:

Take a few moments as a large group, in smaller groups, or individually to discuss the importance of baptism. Consider reading The Sacrament of Holy Baptism as found in Luther's Small Catechism. Focus on the promises that baptism provides and the words that focus on new life, eternal life, and finally on eternity. When Christ raises us from the dead, all Christ promised, freedom from death, resurrected bodies, and eternal life will happen in bodily form. I think it is very evident that God cares for our bodies now in our earthly life, after death, and in the eternal new creation.



# Natural Burial

So, what is natural burial and why should the Christian care about it? Natural burial is nothing new. It has been around for thousands of years and as recently as the 20th century. It's come back recently for a couple of reasons. First, it provides an intimate way to participate in carrying for our loved ones before death all the way to interment in the grave. Second, it's a way to honor the body of the dead. Third, it provides a way of burying our dead with minimal environmental impact, aiding in the conservation of natural resources.

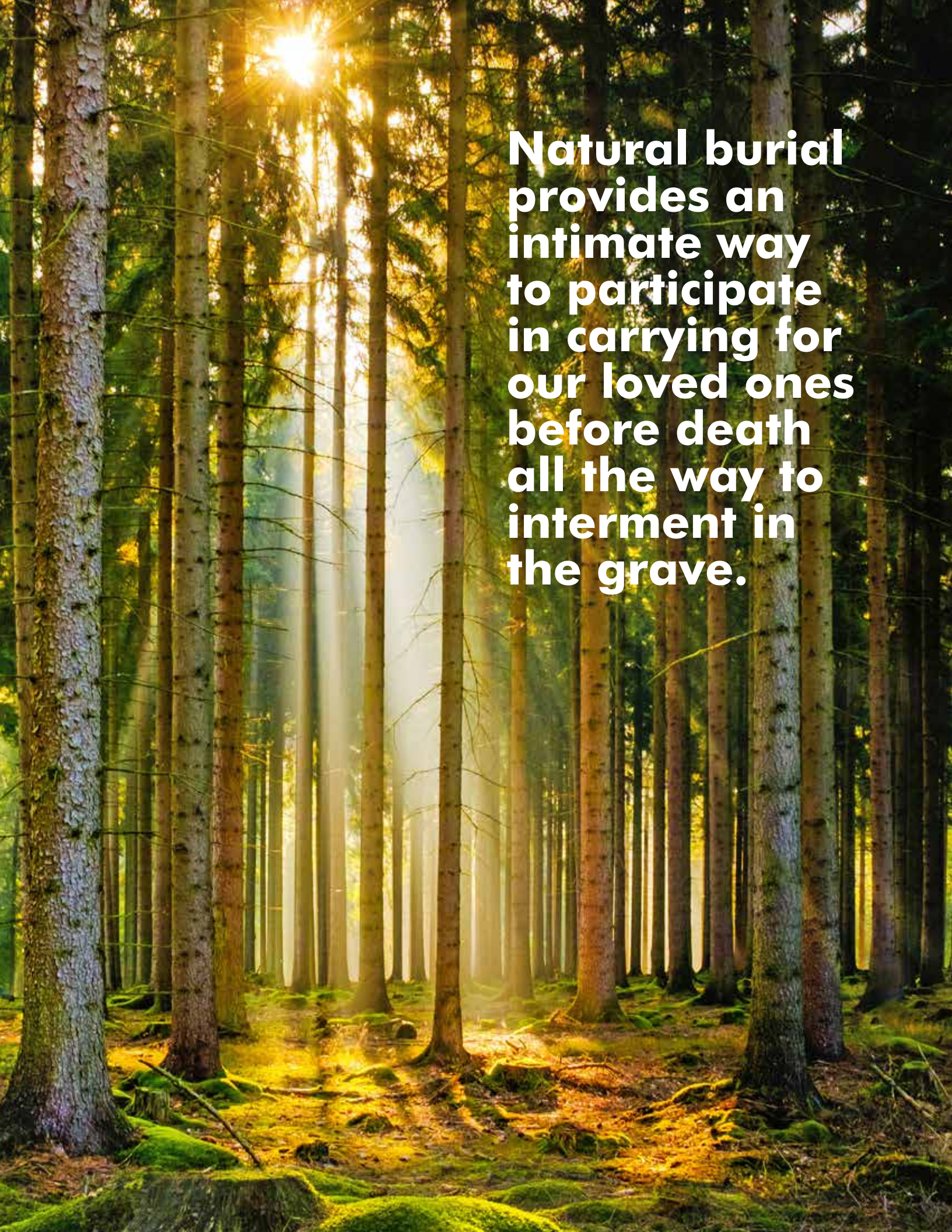
A typical natural burial is a body (without having been embalmed) wrapped in a shroud, or placed in a non-toxic biodegradable casket, and interred directly in the ground (without a vault), and marked with only natural grave markers (such as engraved flat stones), shrubs, or trees.

So, let's break this down a bit. Why no embalming? Isn't it required? Actually no! There are a few exceptions. One, if you are planning on moving the body from one state to another and two, if you use a funeral home for viewing the body they will probably insist on embalming the body. Embalming fluids are traditionally comprised of the carcinogenic chemical formaldehyde. Did you know that funeral directors have a much higher chance of contracting myeloid leukemia? Today, they are working on creating several formaldehyde-free embalming fluids, should you choose to have your body or the body of your loved one embalmed.



Embalming originated during the American Civil War. The main reason was to preserve the body. Many of the battles took place in the heat of summer when a body began to decay quickly. So, families looked for ways to have the body preserved long enough to be safely returned home. Embalming fluids used today only preserve the body through the funeral service. After a week or so, the body begins the natural process of decomposition. Depending on the embalming process there is a chance that the embalming fluids may begin to leak out of the body into the ground contaminating ground and water supplies.



A photograph of a dense forest with tall, slender trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a warm, golden glow and long shadows on the forest floor. The ground is covered in moss and fallen leaves. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Natural burial  
provides an  
intimate way  
to participate  
in carrying for  
our loved ones  
before death  
all the way to  
interment in  
the grave.**



Think of the reason most people choose to embalm a loved one—to preserve the body. But embalming fluids only slow decomposition and often cause damage to the environment when the body is buried. Christians are well served to reflect on all that is entailed in this process, evaluating what is the best way to honor the body of a loved one.

Natural burial preservation options will be discussed in detail in Week 3. These options included refrigeration of the body, the use of dry ice, gel ice packs, or Techni-ice. Most hospitals, and many funeral homes, offer refrigeration of the body until families are able to take possession of it. Both embalming and the preservation options of natural burial preserve the body for a limited time. We believe that the natural burial options are less invasive than embalming.

Once we have decided not to embalm the body, now what? What other decisions do we need to consider regarding natural burial? Depending on the cemetery, some options for natural burial may not be available. Discuss burial requirements with the cemetery you choose. If you are interested in all the natural burial options, contact a cemetery that is certified for “natural/green burial.”



Here are a few items to consider if you choose natural burial. What kind of casket or burial shroud would you choose? There are a variety of biodegradable and nontoxic options: hand-decorated cardboard, woven fiber caskets, pine boxes, and so on. For natural burial a coffin or casket should be made of wood or other materials that do not destroy habitats. Here is a handy website that not only helps you think through these options but lists businesses that supply these products:  
<http://greenburialcouncil.org/home/plan-for-your-green-burial/certified-products/>.

Here are a couple of surprising facts about traditional burial and cremation. Each year, 20 million board feet of hardwood, this includes rainforest woods, are used to build caskets along with 17,000 tons of copper and 64,500 tons of steel. Each cremation uses about 28 gallons of fuel: oil, natural gas, or propane to reach a furnace temperature of 1400 to 1800 degrees and releases about 540 gallons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. So, for one million cremations, 240,000 tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> This is more carbon dioxide pollution than what 22,000 homes can emit each year. The cremated remains are ground into a dust or powder, resembling a sand-like consistency, and returned to the loved one as the ashes. In some cultures, this last step is eliminated in order for family members to retain the bone fragments.

The other costly, and unnecessary, item used in traditional burials is the burial vault. The main reason cemeteries require a burial vault is to maintain a beautiful landscape. The vault prevents the earth from settling, a natural phenomenon around the casket as deterioration begins. Vault manufacturing in the United States requires approximately 1.6 tons of reinforced<sup>2</sup> concrete that goes into the ground for no other reason than to maintain a balanced and level landscape. With natural burial, caretakers replace the ground that has eroded. It's a much more natural way to care for the land.

Finally, with natural burial, grave markers like flat stones or trees and shrubs are used in place of large granite or marble headstones.

1 Katrina Spade, "How Your Burial Affects Climate Change," <https://www.huffpost.com>.

2 "Media Packet," Quick Statistics, Green Burial Council, <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>.



This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Task for the Week

During the week spend some time thinking about your own death. Not so much on death itself, but on what happens to you after you die: the care of your body, the visitation or viewing (if you choose to have one), the funeral, the worship service, the hymns, the scripture passages, the places where these things take place, and even the cemetery where you might be buried and the rationale for being buried there. What things come to your mind? What do you picture about what happens to your body after you die? Have you ever spent time thinking about your body after death has occurred?

In the following weeks you will begin to fill out our guidebook called, *Your Final Journey: A Burial Planning Guide*. This guide will help you plan your funeral. You are welcome to scroll through it now if that helps you prepare to think about your journey through and beyond death.

## Closing

Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands  
For our offenses given;  
But now at God's right hand He stands  
And brings us life from heaven.  
Therefore let us joyful be  
And sing to God right thankfully  
Loud songs of alleluia!  
Alleluia!

Christ Jesus, God's own Son, came down,  
His people to deliver;  
Destroying sin, He took the crown  
From death's pale brow forever:  
Stripped of pow'r, no more it reigns;  
An empty form alone remains;  
Its sting is lost forever.  
Alleluia!

It was a strange and dreadful strife  
When life and death contended;  
The victory remained with life,  
The reign of death was ended.  
Holy Scripture plainly saith  
That death is swallowed up by death,  
Its sting is lost forever.  
Alleluia!



**LSB 458** *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands* (sts. 1, 3–4)

Another appropriate hymn for reflection is **LSB #486** *If Christ Had Not Been Raised from Death*.

# Week 2

---

## Journeying with the Body



## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)



# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## Opening Prayer

Go forth, baptized child of God, from this world  
in the name of God the almighty Father  
who created you,  
in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,  
who suffered for you,  
in the name of the Holy Spirit,  
who was poured out upon you,  
go forth, faithful Christian.  
May you live in peace this day,  
may your home be with God in Zion,  
with all the saints, the washed and anointed children of God,  
now and forever, unto the ages of ages. Amen.<sup>3</sup>



## Contemplation

Questions to help guide contemplation: What do you see in the image above and the image on page 19? What do you notice? Do they have anything in common? What is distinct about each image? How do they connect to the opening prayer?

<sup>3</sup> Prayer of Commendation for the Dying in the Western Rite. Traditional Catholic Prayers.

# Introductory Video

Click on the link below to view the introductory video. Once you have viewed the video work through the group questions below to prepare you for this week's study.



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/2>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion

- 1** What kinds of journeys have you taken in your life? How is your life itself a journey? Where are you headed in your journey?
- 2** Think about the funerals of the baptized children of God that you have known. In your experience, how has the church journeyed with the bodies of these saints or failed to journey with their bodies?
- 3** Why would it be important for the church to understand the burial of the members of the body of Christ as a journey in which we accompany them?



# Bible Connections

The image of the journey is a primary way for describing both the life of the people of Israel and of the new Israel, the church, and of the lives of individuals within Israel. Journey narratives permeate the Scriptures: Abraham's journey to the promised land, the people of Israel's journey from Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land, the journey of Israel into exile and back to Jerusalem, the journey of Christ to the cross, and the missionary journeys of the apostles, preeminently Paul. Stories of journeys also capture the experience of "walking into the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). Death itself is a journey, at last into the rule and reign of God when the resurrected Christ comes again. It is a journey which the entire body of Christ makes, together! These biblical narratives describe the experience of death as a journey of the deceased to the kingdom of God with the entire church accompanying them.

## The Journey of Jacob to His Place of Burial in the Promised Land

*Read Genesis 49:28–50:14*

After blessing his 12 sons, Jacob commanded them to gather him (his body) back to his people, that is to the place in the land of Canaan, the promised land, where the bodies of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah were buried. Jacob, in his dead body, is journeying back to be among his people. And his people—his sons, their families, and their entire households—upon Joseph's request to Pharaoh, journey with Jacob back to Canaan. They accompany him to his home and there they bury/lay to rest his body in the cave that his grandfather Abraham had bought. It is a family affair, this journey. The family of Abraham journeys with Jacob to his place of rest.

## The Journey of Jesus along with His Disciples and Followers to His Passion in Jerusalem

*Read Mark 10:32–34*

Three times in Mark's Gospel, from 8:27–10:52, Jesus predicts that he "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:32). Jesus is "going up to Jerusalem," making his journey. It is a journey to his Pascha, or Passover, from death to life. Just as Israel in the Exodus, the true and faithful Son of Man is journeying from life to death to life. But this paschal journey started even before Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. It was a journey that began when the Word of God came from the heavenly Father, down to earth, and became man, full of grace and truth. As the church says in the Nicene Creed, "who for us men



**Death itself is a journey, at last into the rule and reign of God when the resurrected Christ comes again.**





and for our salvation came down from heaven.” And the journey’s end is not death but Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, and his coming for the final judgment. As the church father Ambrose writes in stanza five of the hymn attributed to him and translated by Martin Luther, “Savior of the Nations, Come” (LSB 332),

God the Father was His source,  
Back to God He ran His course  
Into hell His road went down  
Back then to His throne and crown.

Jesus invites us to make the same journey he makes: the journey from life to death to life. It is a journey from this old, evil, decaying earth to the new heaven and earth that God will establish. Jesus invites us to make the paschal journey in him through the word, baptism, and the Supper of his kingdom. Paul speaks of this paschal journey in Jesus in his final letter to Timothy, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6–8). We are on the same journey as Paul, a departure into death and then onto the resurrection of our bodies and the reception of the crown of righteousness, of new life in Christ in his eternal kingdom. The journey that we began at birth and baptism—crossing the chasm of death—will end in the rule and reign of God in the new heaven and the new earth. That is Jesus’s paschal journey. It is our journey as well.



## The Emmaus Disciples' Journey into the Resurrection Kingdom of God

*Read Luke 24:13–35*

The two Emmaus disciples, followers of Jesus, are literally on a journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, seven miles by foot from Jerusalem. As they journey, talking about all the things that had happened concerning Jesus's condemnation and crucifixion and the news from the angels at Jesus's tomb that he was alive, the risen Jesus draws near and walks with them. Recognizing that the disciples did not understand that it was necessary for the Christ to make this paschal journey through death to life, he took them on a journey as they were walking. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them the things concerning himself in the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). But the journey didn't end there. With their hearts burning at what he had revealed to them they invite him into the inn for dinner where he breaks the bread with them, as he had done so often before, and they recognize him as the risen Christ Jesus. In that meal they journey into the reign of God in Jesus. They meet the Jesus who in his flesh as God's Son has conquered sin, evil, and death and lives glorified forever. By eating and drinking with him these two disciples journey into God's reign as well. Through Jesus's opening of the Scriptures to them about himself and disclosing his identity by breaking bread and eating with them, they begin the journey into the kingdom of God. It is a journey to the eternal rule of God in Jesus in the new heaven and earth. It is a journey to which he invites us through his word that opens our eyes and reveals who he is as Lord of all in heaven and on earth and as victor over all that opposes his reign.

### **Questions to discuss:**

- What other scripture texts come to mind that reflect the journey of the body of Christ and of our journey within it?
- What story is at the center of our baptismal journey?  
How do we know this from the Scripture passages above?
- Why is it important to understand the role that death plays at the middle of our journey in Christ?

# Digging In

Honoring the body of a Christian entails honoring its identity as the gift and handiwork of the Creator. Our body's identity also is defined by the journey that it is making under the lordship of the crucified and risen Jesus. To honor the body means to tell the story of this human body and to make the journey to the place where the body is going. Thomas Long talks about Christian worship as the rehearsal of the story that has given us our identity as creatures of the Triune God. He says, "We rehearse this play called Christian worship in order to participate once more in the story and to refresh our memory about our part in it. This is what a Christian funeral is all about. Someone we love has died, and so once again we get out our old scripts, assemble on stage, and act out one more time the great and hopeful drama of how the Christian life moves from death to life. None of us is an expert at this. Some of us limp, all of us have trouble remembering our lines, and many are weeping even as they move across the stage. We are who we are, flawed to a person, and we will never work out the kinks. But that's not the goal; the goal is to know this story in this play [worship] so well that we know it by heart. . . . That is what we want in a Christian funeral. We do this again and again, every time someone dies, **because it is important for our bodies to know the way home.**"<sup>4</sup>

The Christian church makes the journey with the dying and with their honored dead bodies so that we all might know the way home to the rule and reign of God in Christ Jesus. We tell the paschal story of God in Christ and the story of our lives in him as we make this journey into death with the dying. We'll discuss the rehearsal of this story in Week 4 of this Bible study. Now we want to focus on how we honor the body by making the journey with the body of the dead. It is a journey that begins with the preparation for death. How do we prepare our bodies to know the way home?

## Beginning the Journey into Death

Preparing our body to know the way home begins with preparing ourselves and our bodies for death. As we saw in the first unit, we need to think about our own dying and how we approach death and prepare ourselves to die. This includes thinking about how we prepare our bodies for death. The launching point for this consideration is the place where our stories begin: at the hand of our Creator God in physical birth through our mother's womb and in rebirth in the womb of baptism. Through physical birth and baptismal rebirth we are united to the story of the Creator who recreates what he so graciously created in the first place. Our bodies are important to him and to us. They

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18–19.

are part of our identity as human creatures. We should treat our bodies in the process of their dying as we do everything else connected with our bodies throughout the journey to God's kingdom—as precious gifts of life. Our bodies will die and decay. The death and decay of our bodies provides God our Creator the opportunity to recreate them, to raise them to new life. God recreates our bodies through the body of Christ. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:49, our resurrected bodies bear the image of Christ, the image of the man of heaven, at the final age.

## The Commendation of the Dying

We don't prepare for death alone. We prepare for death within the life of the body of Christ, the church, all of us making the journey together from life through death to new life. We should talk about our dying with one another. We should help one another prepare. And we accompany one another in our bodies on the journey until it is finished. Thus, when a person begins the final steps toward death the church walks with them. We commend them into the hands of their Creator Father. We may use the Rite of Commendation of the Dying in *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* to do so. We commend their bodily life to the Lord. As the final prayer before the blessing says, "Almighty God, You breathed life into Adam and have given earthly life also to [Name], your dear child and servant. With faith in your power to heal and save, we commend [him/her] to You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."<sup>5</sup>

5 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 105. Used with permission. cph.org.

# The Journey from the Place of Death to the Place of Public Visitation

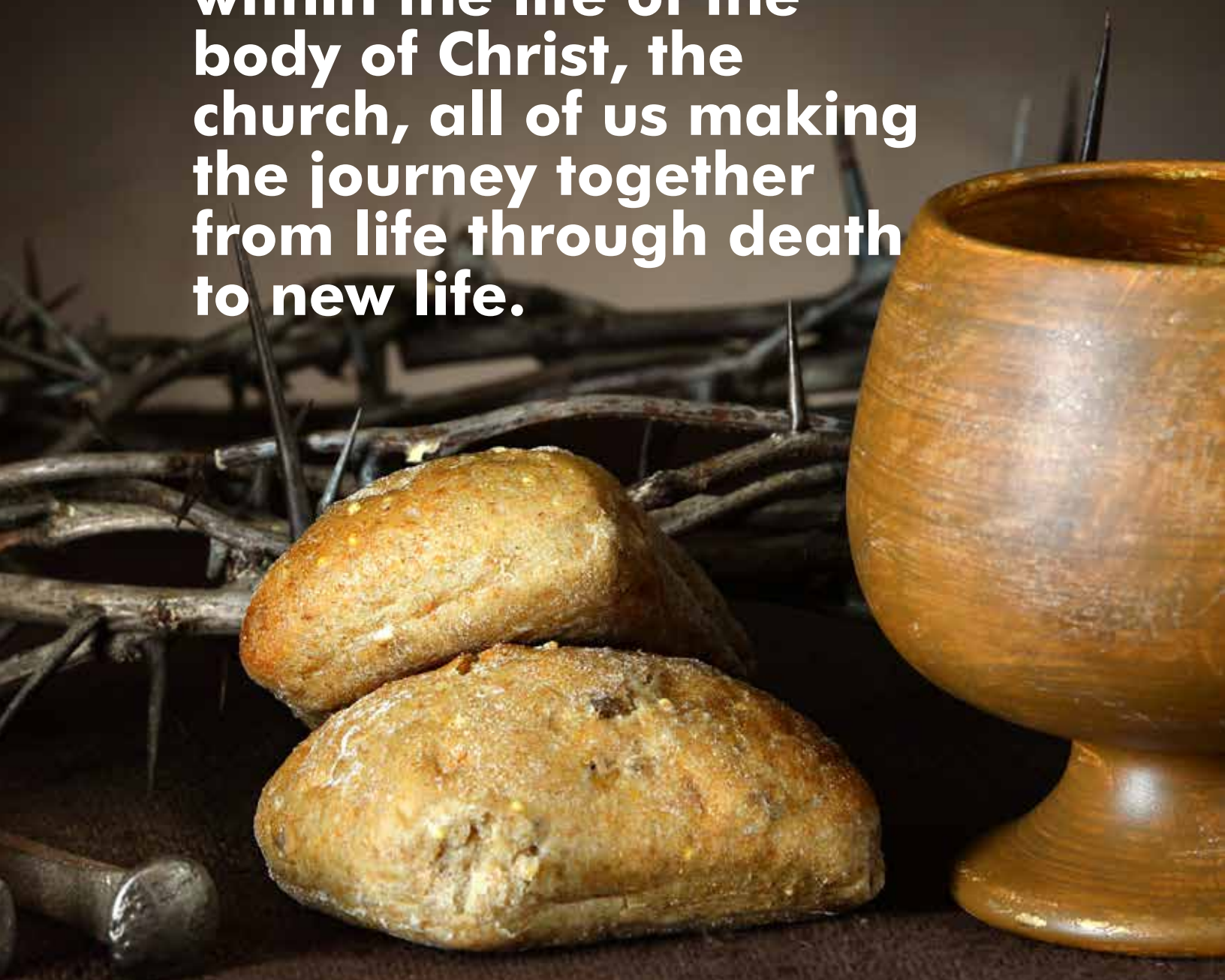
Many people would prefer to die at home. With the advent of hospice care it has become a greater possibility for most people. But no matter where you die, even in cases of sudden death, your body will journey. It may move from the place of death to a place for a visitation or wake or to the place of the funeral. The place of visitation may be the church, the funeral home, or, hearkening back to former days, the home itself [preservation of the body without embalming will be discussed in Week 3]. Wherever your body goes, the church goes with you. When family and loved ones gather around your body following death the church may use the rite of Comforting the Bereaved. Notice the prayer at the rite's beginning which treasures our bodily life in the context of our story in Christ Jesus:

Merciful Father, the generations rise and pass away before You. You are the strength of those who labor and the repose of the blessed dead. We give you thanks for all who have lived and died in the faith, especially for [Name], our dear [brother/sister]. In this body You gave [him/her] life and poured out Your Holy Spirit when you washed [him/her] in the renewing waters of Holy Baptism. By the same Spirit You led [him/her] to confess with [his/her] mouth that Jesus is Lord and to believe in [his/her] heart that You have raised Christ from the dead. Give us faith to commend our [brother/sister] to You and to await with confidence the resurrection of all Your saints, living and departed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 107–8. Used with permission. [cph.org](http://cph.org).



**We don't prepare  
for death alone. We  
prepare for death  
within the life of the  
body of Christ, the  
church, all of us making  
the journey together  
from life through death  
to new life.**





# The Entrance of the Body into the Church for the Funeral

From the place of rest until burial your body journeys to the church [the funerals of many Christians are held in the place where Christians live their lives, the church; the funeral home is another option for the location of the funeral]. Once again, the body of Christ accompanies your body. As your body enters the church the pastor may speak to your family and loved ones the rite for the Entrance of the Body into the Church. In the concluding prayer the pastor prays, “Comfort all who mourn [his/her] death with the hope of the glorious resurrection of the body and a happy reunion in heaven.”<sup>7</sup> As the church travels with your body it confesses and prays that the story is not over: your body will live again!

## The Funeral Rite

The Funeral Rite offers the chance for the church to walk with you in the story of your body’s journey into death and new life in Christ. The most dramatic recognition of your body’s travels is the covering of the casket and the body inside it with the pall, the white baptismal covering that clothes the casket. It is the visible symbol of the robe of Christ’s righteousness in whom you were clothed in baptism. This is your body’s story in Christ: “If we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (Romans 6:5).

7 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 116. Used with permission. [cph.org](http://cph.org).

# The Journey to the Place of Interment and the Committal Rite

But the journey isn't over. Your body, and the church accompanying it, must make its second to last stop: the place of burial [the body, even when cremated, should have a place of rest in/on the earth from which God created it]. Here your body will rest until the day of Christ the Lord's reappearing in his body on the earth. As the blessing of the body in the committal rite says, "May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh."<sup>8</sup> The end of your body's journey comes when God the Father recreates your body from the grave. Then your body will enter into the new heaven and the new earth where we will dwell with God forever.

The body of Christ has borne your body on its final journey from death to life in Jesus. You have made the journey with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your body knows the way home!



8 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 130. Used with permission. [cph.org](http://cph.org).

# Reflection

How do *you* want the church to journey with you into death and with your body after you die? How should *the church* want to journey with you into death and with your body after you die?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Task for the Week

This week we will begin the process of planning our own funeral and how the church and your loved ones will care for your body. Take your time. This is not an easy task. As noted last week, we have created *Your Final Journey: A Burial Planning Guide* to help you walk through this process. Let's start where our journey as Christians begins—our baptism. We died our first death and rose to new life in Christ through our baptism, so that physical and eternal death would not be the end of our story. So spend a moment contemplating the gift of your baptism. When you are ready begin by filling out the section: The Celebration of Your Baptism and Confirmation.

## Closing

Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer,  
Pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;  
Hold me with Thy pow'ful hand.  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,  
Feed me till I want no more;  
Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain  
Whence the healing stream doth flow;  
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar  
Lead me all my journey through.  
Strong deliv'rer, strong deliv'rer,  
Be Thou still my strength and shield;  
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death and hell's destruction,  
Land me safe on Canaan's side.  
Songs of praises, songs of praises  
I will ever give to Thee;  
I will ever give to Thee.



LSB 918 Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

# Week 3

---

## Caring for the Body



## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions  
and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)



# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, it is incredibly comforting to begin each day knowing how deeply you care for each of us—your beloved children. This is always comforting news, but there are days when we come to you with a heavy heart, especially when we must carry the burden of our loved one's death. Today, with open hands, we cast our cares upon you and ask for your guidance as we care for one another. We ask you to shoulder the burdens we carry for the people we love, especially in times of anxious thoughts and in our travels through unknown territory. Receive our anxieties and fears and allow us to stop, for just a moment, and turn our eyes to Jesus and his perfect love. We know our days are numbered but we fear not, for thy rod and thy staff they comfort us. Guide us this day and always to the promise of the cross and everlasting life. In Christ's name alone we pray. Amen!

## **Contemplation**

This week's contemplation is a photograph that shows a woman wrapping a body for burial. There is also another photograph below that shows a husband, with the help of a funeral guide, positioning his wife's body in the coffin. Consider what this experience might be like. Is it something that you think you might be interested in doing, or does the idea make you feel too uncomfortable?





# Introductory Video

Together watch the video: “The Home Funeral Discussed.” Pay attention to the way in which people care for, respect, and love the body throughout the entire process:



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/3>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion


- 1** Reflect on your last experience of the death of a loved one. How much time, after they died, did you spend with him/her? Did you hold his or her hand? Kiss him/her? Care for them in any way?
- 2** Have you ever wondered what it might be like to care for them after death? What might it be like to wash him/her, anoint them etc.? What might that entail?
- 3** You have probably heard of a midwife. This is a person that walks alongside, and assists, a mother in the birth process, the bringing in of life. But have you heard of the death midwife, a home funeral guide, or a death doula? This is a person who walks alongside and assists a person in caring for their dead loved one.

# Bible Connections

“And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment, pure nard, very costly, and she broke it and poured it over his head. . . . What she has come to understand, she has done, she has anointed my body for burial” (Mark 14:3–4, 8). Focus a moment on the words, “she has anointed my body for burial.” What comes to mind first? That the woman has come to understand that Jesus is going to die? Maybe she has come to understand Jesus’s realization that his body is being anointed for burial? All of this is a beautiful act but also encompasses the reality of death. Anointing our loved one for burial provides us with a way to care for and love them even after they die.

“The body is not meant for immortality but for the Lord and the Lord for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13). “Do you not know that our bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 6:15). “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). All three of these texts remind us of our body’s connection to Christ. In our baptism we died with him and through our death we will be raised with him. Our bodies have meaning because Christ died for each of them. His life and his death incorporate us into this life. Our bodies belong to Christ. They aren’t simply vessels. Our body is a member of Christ and, when he returns again, he will resurrect our body. Discuss briefly together this idea of being raised from the dead. What impact does it or should it have on caring for our body today?

“Joseph from Arimathea, an honorable Sanhedrin member, who was also awaiting the reign and rule of God . . . had brought a linen cloth, upon lifting him down, he wrapped him in the linen cloth and placed him in the tomb that had been cut out of the rock” (Mark 15:43,46). “The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go” (John 11:44). Here are beautiful examples of wrapping the body in linen clothes for its burial. Joseph of Arimathea brings with him simple linen cloths to wrap the body for burial and in John’s Gospel, Jesus actually calls them grave clothes. In Acts we read, “Some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him” (Acts 5:6). These New Testament texts and many Old Testament texts describe the wrapping of, the caring of, and the burying of the body. When you think about your own burial consider the simplicity of having your body wrapped in a shroud (a linen cloth) and buried directly into the ground. What is your first response to this idea? Does it provide new avenues for thinking about your own burial? Reflect on these ideas with one another.



**Anointing our  
loved one for burial  
provides us with a  
way to care for and  
love them even  
after they die.**

# Digging In

In Jesus's day (and even today), Jewish people took the burial of the dead very seriously. You've heard the phrase "to pay our last respects." In Jewish culture this meant to care for your loved one after death, to journey with them through and to their final burial rest. Today that same phrase has come to mean, "stop by the funeral home." But that is not the case in the Jewish community, then or today. The Jews took seriously that no dead body was to be left unburied—even that of one's worst enemy.

When it comes to caring for our dead today the typical scenario is to "turn our loved one over to the professionals." But realistically, who knows or loves them more than we do? Who can supply the best care for them? We do it in life, why not in death? In this study, we will explore what it means to care for our dead.

Our loved ones deserve the same care at death that was provided at their baptism. In baptism, we bathe them, wrap them in white, pray over them, journey with them to the font, and celebrate life with them. What if we washed our dead, anointed them, wrapped them in white, journeyed with them to the grave, participated in burying them, and celebrated life in Christ with them? When we care for the body it reminds us that we are serving a member of the body of Christ.

Let's take a few minutes and examine what each step might look like.

## Moving the Body and Obtaining a Death Certificate

First, a doctor, medical examiner, or nurse practitioner must certify the death. The body may not be moved, buried, or cremated before a death certificate is completed. Should you choose to care for the body there are a few laws of which you need to be aware. A dead body should never be moved without proper permits. These may include a transportation permit and, if necessary, a disposition permit. A transportation permit allows you to transport a dead body to wherever it might need to be taken. A disposition permit would be required if you plan on having the body buried on private property rather than a local cemetery. Always check your state requirements.

The book *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*,<sup>9</sup> explains all the requirements and laws, state by state, regarding what you can and cannot do with the body. It is a great resource to guide and direct you through the process of caring for your loved one's body after death.

## Preserving the Body

### Embalming

In Week 1, we discussed embalming as a way of preservation. However, embalming is almost never required and there is no state that requires embalming. However, if you are working with a funeral home chances are you will be required to have the body embalmed. Also, most funeral homes, reflecting their own policies and not legal requirements, will not allow public viewing of the body without embalming. Natural burial provides alternatives to embalming which we will discuss below.

So, embalming is a process for preserving the body. The process started in America during the Civil War as a way to preserve the body in order to return it home to the family from the battlefield, often great distances from home. Today embalming is done to “make the body presentable” to the living. Embalming is a surgical process of removing bodily fluids and replacing them with formaldehyde-based chemical solutions. These chemicals are dangerous to the environment and to the embalmers themselves.

When a funeral home prepares the body for embalming, they begin by washing the body with a disinfectant solution, which is not actually necessary. In most circumstances, the body only needs to be washed with water. Then the body's limbs are massaged and manipulated to relieve rigor mortis in order to properly place them where desired. Facial openings such as eyes and mouth are permanently closed.

9 Joshua Slocum and Lisa Carson, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, 2011).



There are two types of embalming: arterial embalming and cavity embalming. In arterial embalming the fluids are drained via the veins. Cavity embalming involves puncturing the chest cavity and abdomen to drain gas and fluids from the body. Today most funeral homes only perform cavity embalming. Once the body has been drained, the embalmer begins the process of filling the body with formaldehyde, methanol, ethanol, and dyes. The intention is to make the dead look “life-like.” Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why we do this? Is it perhaps because we have so much difficulty facing death? Why is that?

## Refrigeration, Gel Pack Ice, or Dry Ice

What then are the options? If the body will be placed in a bio-degradable coffin or shroud within the first 24 hours of death, simply turning on the air conditioner or opening windows to let in cool air should work just fine. But should you be holding a vigil, at home or in the church over the next couple days, you will need to consider other options such as dry ice, conventional ice, gel pack ice, non-formaldehyde chemicals, or refrigeration to preserve the body. Refrigeration is usually more effective than embalming in preserving the body and contains no harmful chemicals. Keeping the body as cool as possible is the main point. Almost all hospitals, and some funeral homes, have access to body-size refrigeration units. Keeping the body cool slows the process of decomposition. Remember that embalming is not normally used when choosing natural burial.

## Washing the Body

Washing the body of our loved one is simply that. It will normally take 4 to 6 people to do the job. The job is not to scrub them clean, but simply to cleanse the body once death has occurred. Caring for the body in this way engages our hearts, minds, and bodies with the dead and helps, in some way, to facilitate the grieving process. The purpose of caring and washing the body is to help alleviate some of the sights and odors that are normal when death occurs. When a vigil is being held, washing the body is a beautiful way to honor our loved one's body and is usually the final physical contact one will experience. In order to wash the body carefully place a few sheets or large pieces of plastic under the body and wash each crevasse of the body. Although this may seem a bit uncomfortable at first, mainly because we are so culturally alienated from death, those that have participated have found much comfort in the process.

Essential areas that will need attention when the body is being washed include the genital and rectal areas due to the bladder and intestines relaxing. Consider putting an adult diaper on the body after washing to help control normal leakage.

Any place where the skin of the body is touching other skin, including the underarm areas, the chin, and between the legs, get between the folds of the skin and clean well. One of the final things that will need to be done is to provide oral mouth hygiene. This can be done by simply brushing the teeth or applying mouth wash with a swab to the inside cavity of the mouth. Oral care may need to be done more than once and is usually a good final step in preparing the body.

A general washing from head to toe (back, front, and sides) should provide the care needed. Consider washing the hair, shaving the face, and, if desired, applying makeup. You might even consider dressing the body if there will be a time provided for viewing the body before burial.

## Anointing/Conditioning the Body

“And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment, pure nard, very costly, and she broke it and poured it over his head. . . . ‘What she has come to understand, she has done, she has anointed my body for burial’” (Mark 14:3, 8).

Anointing or conditioning the body can be a beautiful final act in caring for the dead. Today many body washes and anointing oils have been created especially for this purpose.

There will be many things you will notice happening to the body as decay begins. This may include increased paleness, facial changes, and darkness under the body where blood begins to settle. The amount of change will depend largely on the condition of the body prior to death, the cause of death, the temperature of the body, and the environment surrounding the body.

## Preparing the Body

The main parts of the body that need to be attended to include the eyes, the mouth, the hair (usually), and the body’s position, if there will be a public viewing of the body.

The eyes normally remain open after death and most choose to have them closed. To close them gently bring the lids down and place a small bag of rice or beans over the lids. It will take a couple of hours for the eyes to remain closed.

The mouth is usually the other part of the body that may need to be closed. This usually requires two people. In order to do this, use a long, thin piece of cloth. Have one person stand at the head of the dead person, while the other brings the mouth closed. Then place the cloth under the jaw and tie a knot at the top of the head. This too will take several hours to keep the mouth closed. Sometimes it may be impossible to completely close the mouth.


Note on *rigor mortis* (the stiffening of the joints and muscles): Rigor mortis affects every muscle in the body within about two to six hours following death. It typically begins with the eyelids, neck, and jaw. Rigor mortis comes and goes for the first 24 hours, but a body becomes pretty rigid after the first twelve hours. It may not be found in infant or child corpses due to the fact that their muscle mass is still pretty small. In the early stages, gentle massage can help stimulate the muscle to move to a desired location, but this should be done as soon as possible following death.

After death, the blood in the body settles, normally to the lowest parts of the body, causing the face and upper portions of the body to become yellow and pale. There may also be discharge of fluids from the body, so make sure you have access to lots of absorbent materials.

## Wrapping or Casketing the Body

Note: If you are dealing with a funeral home, they are required by law to show and provide you prices for all caskets, which includes many of the options listed below. Funeral homes cannot deny you the opportunity to supply your own casket. Shrouds, coffins, and caskets will be covered in detail in Week 5.

Did you know that caskets or coffins can be purchased on-line and shipped directly to your home? Both Amazon and Costco sell them. Did you know many in the Amish community still build and sell coffins or caskets? Did you know you can even buy a bookcase that when dismantled can become your personal coffin? Obviously, lots of options are available.

A close-up photograph of a newborn baby being baptized. A priest's hand, wearing a white sleeve with a gold cross embroidery, is pouring water over the baby's head. The baby's face is partially submerged in water, and water droplets are visible on their skin. A lit candle is visible in the background, casting a warm glow.

**Our loved ones  
deserve the  
same care at  
death that was  
provided at  
their baptism.**



If you or your loved one has decided on natural burial, the coffin or casket needs to be non-toxic and biodegradable. The burial will normally be done directly in the ground, so the simpler the casket or shroud the easier the decomposition. Options include cardboard, wicker, simple wood, bamboo, teak, banana leaf, hemp, willow, organic wool and felt, rattan, and seagrass caskets, along with wrapping the body in a simple shroud.

## Shrouds

Shrouds, usually referred to as burial clothes, are cloths that wrap or wind around the body. Shrouds are acceptable for burial along with favorite blankets or quilts, as long as they are made of natural fibers such as wool, silk, hemp, or cotton. Shrouds can be a beautiful way to display the body and some of them include a built-in carrying board for ease of transportation. The major requirement of wrapping or winding the body is that the body must be wrapped from head to toe. This webpage <https://kinkaraco.com/> provides lots of options for burial shrouds.

## Home Funeral Guides

When it comes to natural burial, a home funeral guide, death midwife, or death doula serves in a significantly different role than a typical funeral director. Their role is to assist the family in the dying process much like a midwife assists with the birthing process. Most are women, but men are beginning to serve in this role. This title usually covers the gamut of services they offer. In fact, most home funeral guides work with the express desire to empower families through the death process and help the family to make its own decisions. They have no desire, unlike the traditional funeral director, to direct and control the funeral. Their goal is to provide guidance, support, and practical knowledge for the family or pastor to direct it themselves. They will or should know the respective state's legal requirements on all practices of natural burial. They are a great resource during the death of a loved one.



## Options

Although this week discusses the practices of natural burial, you can choose various elements of the natural burial process and incorporate them into a more traditional burial. In Week 6, we will discuss at length the spectrum of choices available.

## More Personal and Loving Experience

Many people who have been involved in natural burial practices—from washing and caring for the body to the actual burying of the body—have found that it provides them with a more loving and personal experience and has even helped them in the mourning process. Some of the cemeteries that offer natural or green burials allow the family to participate in every aspect of the process, should the family choose, from digging the grave, transporting the body, lowering the body into the grave, and filling the grave for final closure.

## Task for the Week

This week may be even more difficult. We want you to consider what decisions you might make regarding the care of your body once death has occurred, using *Your Final Journey* workbook. Start working with the section titled: My Funeral Plans. This section will include decisions like how you want your body to be prepared for burial, how you want your body to be preserved, what clothing you want to wear, and finally your preferences regarding a viewing of your body and/or a visitation. This week you are making major decisions about what happens to your body after your death. Don't try completing all of it at one time. Take your time. Carefully consider the questions being asked of you and pray about them.

# Closing

For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up  
what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time  
to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to cast away stones, and a time to  
gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain  
from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

Another appropriate hymn for reflection is *There is a Time for Everything*, LSB #762.



# Week 4

---

## Rehearsing the Story of the Body





## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions  
and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)

# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## Opening Prayer

Almighty God, by the death of Your Son Jesus Christ You destroyed death, by His rest in the tomb You sanctified the graves of Your saints, and by His bodily resurrection You brought life and immortality to light so that all who die in Him abide in peace and hope. Receive our thanks for the victory over death and the grave that He won for us. Keep us in everlasting communion with all who wait for Him on earth and with all in heaven who are with Him, for He is the resurrection and the life, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The preceding prayer is the last prayer the pastor will pray over our bodies before they are committed to the ground.



## Contemplation

Questions to help guide contemplation: What do the two images above tell you about the story of your life? These are images of natural burial locations. Does that affect your perception of the images and how they inform the story of your life? How does the opening prayer shape your perception of the story of your life in light of these pictures?

10 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 130. Used with permission. [cph.org](http://cph.org).

# Introductory Video

Click on the link below to view the introductory video. Once you have viewed the video work through the group questions below to prepare you for this week's study.



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/4>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion

- 1 How would you tell your story, the story of your life?
- 2 When you tell your story what role does your body play in that story? How do you tell your story so that your body is a central part of that story?
- 3 How does God tell your story?
- 4 When God tells your story what role does your body play in that story?

# Bible Connections

What is the purpose of a funeral service after all? This is a question which the word of God will help us answer. But society, and even the church, is increasingly turning in other directions. In a recent Washington Post article on the changing nature of funerals, the columnist writes, “Dayna West knows how to throw a fabulous memorial shindig. She hired Los Angeles celebration-of-life planner Alison Bossert—yes, those now exist—to create what West dubbed ‘Memorialpalooza’ for her father, Howard, in 2016 a few months after his death. ‘None of us is going to get out of this alive,’ says Bossert, who helms Final Bow Productions. ‘We can’t control how or when we die, but we can say how we want to be remembered.’ And how Howard was remembered! There was a crowd of more than 300 on the Sony Pictures Studios lot. A hot-dog cart from the famed L.A. stand Pink’s. Gift bags, the hit being a baseball cap inscribed with ‘Life’s not fair, get over it’ (a beloved Howardism). A constellation of speakers, with Jerry Seinfeld as the closer (Howard was his personal manager). And babka (a tribute to a favorite ‘Seinfeld’ episode). ‘My dad never followed rules,’ says West, 56, a Bay Area clinical psychologist. So why would his memorial service?”<sup>11</sup>

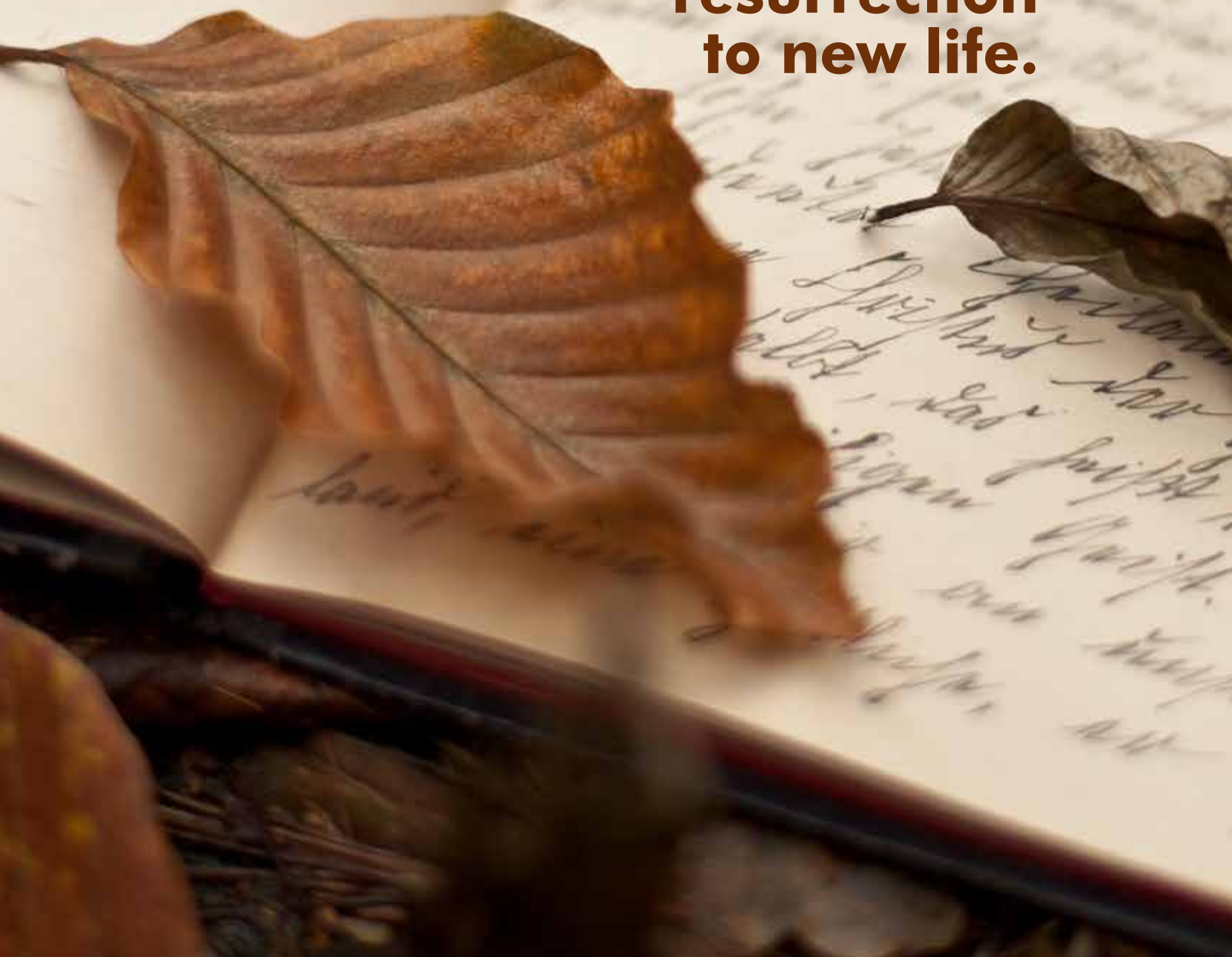
Remembering, telling a life story, is a critical aspect of the memorial service that Dayna West planned for her father. She wanted to remember her father and for her father to be remembered. Memorial services, the primary form funerals increasingly are taking in modern society, attempt to provide the opportunity to remember a person’s life, to tell their life story. Within the destructive grip of death, which aims to wipe both our body and our memory from the face of the earth, striving to keep someone’s memory alive appears to be the primary thing we should be doing.

But is that the way we should remember? Is that the story of a person’s life that we want to tell? In the face of death, it is like grasping at the wind. The aim of the funeral service, unlike memorial services, is not simply for us to try to keep the memory of a person alive. Rather, the funeral service aims to tell the only story of their life that truly keeps their memory alive, a story that ends with their resurrection to new life. The funeral service tells the story of a human being’s bodily life. It is the story of one who has died, but whose body will be raised at the return of the Christ who has been raised from the dead. The funeral service is about entrusting an embodied child of God to the Lord. A primary question to ask about any service observed at someone’s death, but especially for a Christian funeral service, is: “What story did the entire service tell?” Did it try to tell the person’s story alone and so rely upon what is but a fleeting memory? Or did it

11 Karen Heller. “The funeral as we know it is becoming a relic — just in time for a death boom.” *Washington Post*. April 15, 2019.



**The funeral service  
aims to tell the  
only story of their life  
that truly keeps their  
memory alive, a story  
that ends with their  
resurrection  
to new life.**



tell the person's story, including the role of their body, within God the Creator's story of this child of God that He created and will restore to life? With this purpose in mind for the rites of Christian burial, let's turn to the ways in which the word of God describes the telling of our life stories when we die.

## Rehearsing the Story of Jesus's Pascha (Passover from Death to Life)

*Read 1 Peter 3:18–22.*

We might be inclined to tell our life stories in one way, and that way of telling, dominated by the sinner's voice, would be devoid of the Creator's perspective. But God the Creator, our heavenly Father, has a particular way of telling our stories as the one who created us. He tells our story through one particular human being, his Son, the Word sent from him who took on human flesh. Prior to Jesus our one common story was the story of our forebears, Adam and Eve. As Paul tells our story in Romans 5:12, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." But God would not let the story end there, with our destruction. Rather, there is one man who finishes the Creator's story. As Paul tells us in Romans 5:15, "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." Through that one man, Jesus Christ, God's grace has been poured out on us.

God's grace is that the end of Adam's story is no longer the end of our story. Christ's story is now our full story. Peter rehearses that story in 1 Peter 3. God the Father, through his Son, Jesus Christ, has brought his creatures back to him. The Creator is recreating us through the one man Jesus Christ. He does so by incorporating us into Jesus's life and story. As he was put to death and made alive in the Spirit, so we are put to death and made alive in the Spirit. Just like Noah and his family were brought safely through the destructive waters of the flood by the ark, so we are brought safely through sin and death by our journey into the waters of Jesus's baptism. With Jesus in baptism we make the Passover (Pascha) from death to resurrection. Through that event God recreates us and brings us to his heaven on earth, his kingdom, where he reigns. This is how God tells our story. This is the gospel story of God.



*Read Luke 23:50–56.*

This gospel story of God, our story in Christ, is told, not independent of our actual living and dying, but encompassed and surrounded by it. Although God completes the story of all humans in Jesus, his story incorporates our story into his. We are created, live, and die. In that way all of our living and dying is part of his story into which we are baptized. As one hymn, “No Saint on Earth Lives Life to Self Alone” (LSB 747), puts it,

No saint on earth lives life to self alone  
Or dies alone, for we with Christ are one.  
So if we live, for Christ alone we live,  
**And if we die, to Christ our dying give.**  
In living and in in dying this confess:  
We are the Lord’s, safe in God’s faithfulness.<sup>12</sup>

The final part of our story on this earth is our death and burial. In the face of death—the placement of our lifeless body six feet underground—and the decay of our body to dust, we might be prone to despair. But this is where the story of Jesus’s burial at the hands of Joseph of Arimathea and the women proclaims God’s story to us. Our death and burial have been incorporated into the story of Jesus’s death and burial. Jesus’s body did not decay (Acts 2:31) and did not remain underground. On the third day his body was raised to life. That is God’s gospel story about us. We will be buried. We will rise again to life. That is the end of the story that the church tells at every funeral. The assembly performs this gospel story: the story of God’s life-renewing and recreating work in his Son, Jesus Christ.

## Rehearsing the Story of Your Passover from Death to Life

*Read Romans 6:1–14.*

The gospel story of God becomes our story through our baptism into the waters of Jesus’s baptism, his Passover from death to life. Through our own baptism into his baptismal waters our story is now one of passing over from death to life. As Paul says in Romans 6:4–5, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” This is how we should consider ourselves. This is the story about ourselves that we should tell and want the church to

12 Norman J. Kansfield, *No Saint on Earth Lives Life to Self Alone* (Norman J. Kansfield, 1997), From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 747.

tell: considering ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). We share this story together: all the baptized children of God. It is our common story. As Paul says, “**All of us . . .** were baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3) Our lives with God our Creator begin at the same place and with the same story: baptized, recreated, reborn in Christ Jesus through the renewing, birthing waters of baptism. Through our baptismal Passover from death to life, we are gathered into the community of the baptized when we are reborn in the baptismal womb. And when we die we are gathered into that same baptismal community from which we were reborn. The church gathers to tell its story at the beginning of the baptismal life of every child of God. It gathers again to tell its story as the baptismal life of every child of God is brought to its completion in this earthly life, awaiting the final fulfillment of baptism when our bodies are raised on the last day. This is the church’s story! It is our story as those baptized into Christ Jesus: “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:8). God’s story in Christ is forever our story in Christ.

## Rehearsing Our Passover Stories Together in the Body of Christ

*Read Ephesians 2:13–22 and Ephesians 4:1–6, 15–16.*

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (Ephesians 2:14, 16). Jesus’s Passover from death to life through his passion and death on the cross is God’s great act of mercy and grace to the world. Through the mercy extended to both Jew and Gentile God through his Son, Jesus Christ establishes peace between the two. In his mercy we have become one body. So then we are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are fellow citizens with the saints (Old Testament saints is Paul’s referent) and members of the household of

God (Ephesians 2:19). The same mercy story of God encompasses all of us, Jew and Gentile. We are all one through the peace preached through his cross (Ephesians 2:17). We all rehearse and tell together this same cross-inscribed story of mercy as our one story as those reconciled within the body of Christ.

### Questions to discuss:

- What other scripture texts come to mind that reflect the gospel story of creation and new creation into which God has incorporated us in Christ Jesus?
- Can you put into your own words how your personal creaturely story has been embraced and transformed by the gospel story?
- How do you want that unified story in Christ to be told in your funeral?



The goal is that we grow into a “holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21). It is a holy temple built on the cornerstone that is Christ Jesus, Jew and Gentile built together as “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). This is the ongoing work of God in the presence of his people, building us in Christ by the Spirit toward the eternal dwelling that we will be in the new heaven and the new earth. We will dwell bodily in that eternal temple. We tell this story and its culmination as those to whom our Creator has given bodies. The Passover story of Jesus that we rehearse is a story about our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Because we are one in the body of the Lord, we travel with our beloved brothers and sisters throughout their journey through life and death, telling the story of their Passover from death to life. The Christian assembly travels with its dead because we are one body. In some mysterious way, our bodies are united by the Spirit in Christ. We are one body because we participate in the same story of God’s life in Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:4–6, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” United to one another, we tell our brother’s/sister’s bodily story in Christ Jesus. The Christian community sings, prays, and tells the gospel story, says farewell for now to the beloved dead, and returns our friend to God with thanksgiving. We do this because we love our brothers and sisters. We do this because we want to speak the truth in love. We do this because we want to tell the end of their story, of our story: to be united to the head of the body that is Christ Jesus. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:15–16, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

# Digging In

The story that a Christian funeral tells is a story about a human creature, one that God the Creator brought into existence, who rebelled against God and chose self-reliance that leads to death, and whom the Creator will raise to life and lead into the new heaven and new earth that God is preparing. Christian funerals should enact this story from creation to re-creation of the human being. Telling and enacting this story of the dead is the primary purpose for which the church conducts funerals. Funerals are not primarily a therapeutic exercise. Their primary purpose is not to make us feel better or to console us. Not that they shouldn't console us in the face of death, but this is not the primary purpose of a funeral. Because many Christians now view funeral exercises as primarily therapeutic, there has been a general trend for Christians away from attending funeral services and toward attending only the wake/visitation. In this therapeutic mindset people think, "I go to the visitation because all I have to offer is my presence and my words to make those mourning feel better. Why bother going to the funeral service, which doesn't allow me to do that." As Thomas Long writes in his book, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*,

When it is clear that the funeral is a dramatic reenactment of the gospel, this shines a bright light on what the funeral is not. Despite popular misconceptions a funeral is not primarily a quiet time when people gather to reflect on the legacy of the deceased, a *devotional service dealing with grief*, a show of community support for the mourning family, or even a "celebration of life." Good funerals, in fact, do all of these things—console the grief-stricken, remember and honor the deceased, display community care, and give thanks for all the joys and graces experienced in the life of the one who has died. But these are some of the consequences of a good funeral, not its central meaning or purpose.<sup>13</sup>

13 Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, 78.

Rather, the funeral is to tell the gospel story of God in Christ into which the deceased was grafted. Long summarizes the primary purpose of a funeral with these points:

1. The whole funeral, as an act of drama growing out of baptism, proclaims the gospel.
2. Because the funeral is a piece of drama, it is crucial to enact the gospel script, that is to be sure that it is the Christian narrative being performed at a funeral, not some other story.
3. The Christian funeral, as a sacred ritual, has the power to reaffirm and deepen the gospel vision of life and death. But much depends upon the participants' capacity to enter with awareness into the ritual arena.<sup>14</sup>

The participants, as we'll see below, are the entire Christian assembly. And they are called to enact the gospel story of Jesus's Passover from death to life as the story of the deceased and to represent it in ritual as well as words. The participants should have some awareness of why they are enacting the story through these rituals: bringing order to the chaos of death, shining light on the extraordinary nature of human life in God, and living out through the ritual of the funeral the true, alternative story of the destiny of human beings and the cosmos in relation to the Creator.

This is one of the reasons it is important to treat the dead sister or brother as a creature. In this way the story begins in the right place. Our living and dying is subsumed within the life and will of the God who created us. In and of itself this is not good news. It simply indicates that the Creator is the origin of all things and that we human creatures are utterly dependent upon God for life. And our dying only happens in accord with God's will in relation to the judgement he pronounces against sinners. Death is the initial pronouncement of God's judgment. If our bodies are to live, then God the Creator must give us life. The presence of the body of the dead saint at a funeral helps us to recognize this. This is one of the reasons it is important that the dead be at their own funerals. When we see our fellow baptized dead in front of us, we can't escape the real story that envelops us. And that story is one of sin, rebellion, death, and judgment. As Paul says in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" In the presence of the dead we are driven to tell the story of God, the gospel story that is our only deliverance from the jaws of death. It is that story that we proclaim in the face of death and to all Christians, living and dead. As the pastor says over the casket at the committal, "We now commit the body of our brother/sister to the ground/its resting place/the deep; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope

14 Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, 79, 82, 98.

of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subdue all things to himself.”<sup>15</sup> Only God the Creator can give life and can raise the dead through his risen Son. That is the gospel story. Outside of that story we are just earth, ashes, dust.

The gospel story is the story of our life from creation to recreation, from life to death to eternal life in God’s new heaven and new earth. The primary tenets of natural burial help us as faithfully as possible to tell that story. We preserve the body until burial in the natural state in which God created it and to which he will raise it on the last day (no embalming). We place the body back into the earth from which it came and into which it will decompose, surrounded by God-created natural materials that will also decompose, awaiting the fulfillment of God’s promise to breathe life again into our bodies (no man-made materials and concrete vaults for burial). We place the body into a burial environment that reflects that we are part—along with the earth, plants, and fellow creatures—of the good earth (Psalm 104) that God has created (consider a natural burial cemetery). All these aspects of natural burial are ways in which we can tell the gospel story most effectively and faithfully.


Through the texts, prayers, and ritual of the various funeral rites the assembly of God’s people enact that gospel story.<sup>16</sup> The church orders the event of dying and the experience of death through the rituals of the funeral rites to bring order into the upheaval that is death. How do we get from mourning and upheaval to a steady course into the future? The words and ritual of the funeral rites allow us to make that movement with strengthened faith and hope. Through the ordered events of the funeral rites we see beyond the ordinary events of life, including death, to the wondrous reality of God’s life in Christ and the story God is bringing to completion in Jesus. Through the words and the ritual we tell important stories about God and about ourselves, especially the dead brother or sister whom we love, that embrace the past and the present and point us to the future in hope of bodily life beyond death. As we journey with the body from place to place we rehearse the story, marking the spaces where the person lived, died, proclaimed the name of the saving God, and will come to rest. We rehearse the story in the place of death. In the rite of commendation of the dying we commend the dying into the peace of God in death and ask God to “receive them into the company of saints and angels to await the resurrection.”<sup>17</sup>

15 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 130. Used with permission. cph.org.

16 For a very helpful account of the purposes and themes of the funeral rites, see Bryan Wolfmüller, *Final Victory: Contemplating the Death and Funeral of a Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009). Wolfmüller walks through and comments on all the rites, including the prayer texts and actions of the rites.

17 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 95. Used with permission. cph.org.





**The gospel story is the story of our life from creation to recreation, from life to death to eternal life in God's new heaven and new earth.**



Following death and the provision of a death certificate, the body of the baptized can be transported to the place where it will reside until the funeral service. This may be the funeral home, the church, or the home of the deceased. Whether to have a visitation is a decision that the family and loved ones make at their discretion. If there is a visitation where family, friends, and the body of Christ view the deceased and console the survivors—whether in the home, the funeral home, or the church—we tell the story of life in Christ for this baptized child of God in her/his various vocations. The benefit of a visitation in the home or at the church is that it places our dead brother or sister in the context of where their bodily life story was lived. These are their two homes and we gather to remember, give thanks, and console one another on account of their baptismal life. The visitation provides the opportunity to say goodbye for now in a personal way and to receive the mutual consolation of the body of Christ. But families and loved ones may decide that the funeral service provides the best context for saying goodbye and consoling one another and forego a visitation.

The rite of the comforting of the bereaved, which can be performed either at the family's first viewing of the body after its release from the place of death or at the visitation, we pray the story of the baptized dead and the story that belongs to all of us, as exemplified in the prayer of consolation at the viewing of the body for the first time after death:

Merciful Father, the generations rise and pass away before you. You are the strength of those who labor and the repose of the blessed dead. We give you thanks for all who have lived and died in the faith, especially for our dear brother/sister. In this body you gave him/her life and poured out your Holy Spirit when you washed him/her in the renewing waters of Holy Baptism. By the same Spirit you led him/her to confess with his/her mouth that Jesus is Lord and to believe in his/her heart that you have raised Christ from the dead. Give us faith to commend our brother/sister to You and to await with confidence the resurrection of all your saints, living and departed. Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.<sup>18</sup>

From here we journey with the body to the church and tell this story of baptismal life. As the body is brought into the church, we recognize our mortality and the hope of the resurrection that is ours in Christ Jesus as we place the white pall over the coffin. In the funeral rite itself, we intersect the story of the creaturely life of the baptized dead with the story of the Triune God who gives us new life through his word, the waters of bap-

18 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 107–8. Used with permission. [cph.org](http://cph.org).

tism, and the bread and wine of Christ's meal. In the texts and actions of the rite, and especially in the proclaimed word and in the sermon, we remember and give thanks for the mighty deeds of God and the life of the deceased who participated in God's mighty works.<sup>19</sup> As Thomas Long notes, "The major theme of a funeral is the gospel story, and the life story of the person who has died is a motif running through this larger theme; perhaps more precisely, a funeral is about the intertwining of these two narratives. At a funeral, the faithful community gathers to enact the promises of the gospel; and the Christian convictions about life and death, as they are refracted through the prism of the life of the one who has died."<sup>20</sup> The confession of the Apostles' Creed is a good intersection point for both stories. And the preacher will tell the story of creation to recreation in such a way that it is told through the life of the baptized deceased laying in death before the assembly. That is the central role of the sermon in the funeral liturgy: to preach the story of baptismal life in the crucified and risen Christ as the identity of the baptized dead and the story in which they lived out their life bodily. The homily tells us who has called us together (God), why we are here (because of the dead before us), what we are doing here (rehearsing their bodily story in the body of Christ), and what this funeral story is leading to (rest in the grave and resurrection on the last day).

At the place of departure from this earthly life to await the new heaven and the new earth, the cemetery, we plant into the ground the body of our beloved that it might bear much fruit in the resurrection of the dead. We travel into the place of death to proclaim that Christ is risen! And we journey from there in the peace of the Lord, knowing that in Christ our sister or brother will rise and so will we. It is important we tell the story of

19 Eulogies find their place in the funeral rite in relationship preaching that intersects both stories. Thomas Long refers to this as "Naming and Witness." He writes: "Here is a controversial element in a funeral, the time when the community explicitly evokes the biography and memory of the deceased. This can be done in a variety of ways. A memorial statement describing the life of the one who has died can be read by the pastor or someone else. Something created by the deceased (music, poetry, art, etc.) can be offered. People who were close to the deceased—neighbors, friends, relatives—can make short speeches, giving remembrance. Inspirational readings from sources other than Scripture can be included here. What makes this element controversial is that there are so many ways it can go off the rails. It can drift into an inauthentic form of eulogizing, in which the deceased is romanticized and, thus, misremembered. It can lapse into sentimentality, pomposity, frivolity, pedantry, or just sheer tedium. So many and so great are the risks that some pastors and congregations forbid this sort of activity in funerals altogether, which is probably an overreaction. It is better to think of this, like the collect, as a kind of offering of the people. At this point in the service, what they have brought to give to God—their memories, their sense of sorrow, their words of thanksgiving for the life of the person they have lost—is now received and blessed. Of course, it can help if the coaches, cousins, and coworkers who plan to speak at the funeral are told in advance that they are actually crafting offerings, not roasts and after-dinner speeches."

20 Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, 78

resurrection in the cemetery so that all the baptized can confront their mortal enemy, death, and proclaim to it that in Christ's death and resurrection it has lost its sting.

This resurrection story belongs to all of us, to the entire church. We are all actors in rehearsing this story. But the reason we are gathered to tell the story at this time is because of the baptized dead. We wouldn't be here if they hadn't died. People are fond of saying that funerals are for the living. And they are. **But they are first for the dead.** The living gather only because of the primary player, the person who has died. For this reason, it is important not to ignore or dismiss the role of the baptized dead. We must allow them their space to play their role in the assembly. For this reason, it is highly desirable to have the body of the deceased present in the funeral rites. It is preferable for the body to be visibly present until the funeral rite proper. Obviously, there may be reasons to conceal the body in a casket or shroud, for example a loved one's body severely deformed by the circumstances of death. But normally we want to see the body of our fellow baptized. It is preferable to hold the funeral with the body present before cremation. But in cases where the body is cremated before the funeral, it is highly desirable if the container with the ashes of the deceased is present for the funeral, perhaps with a picture of the deceased positioned next to the cremains. Ideally, the ashes, placed in an urn or other suitable container, would be carried into the church in the entrance procession, just as a casket would be carried or wheeled into the nave. In this way the body of the baptized is present in the telling of the story of their life in Christ.

In addition to the baptized dead as the primary actor in the story, the other actors include the assembly of the baptized—the church, the pastor presiding at the funeral (usually the pastor of the church where the deceased was a member) and family and friends, both Christian and non-Christian. All have a role to play in rehearsing the gospel story in

relationship to the life of the deceased through word, song, and ritual. Pastors and members of the assembly read the Scriptures and pray the prayers. The assembly sings the story and prays the prayers. Family and friends name and bear witness to the life of the deceased and bring their story into intersection with the gospel story. And all move with the body from the place of death to the place of rest. In playing their roles the gospel is proclaimed and the deceased are embraced within those gospel promises.





When the church gathers for the funeral of a deceased brother or sister, it rehearses the story of the deceased's bodily life, a story that stretches from the creation of that person in their body to their resurrection in their body at Jesus's reappearing. This rehearsal through the funeral rites is the good labor of the church by which she commends the dead sister or brother to the Lord. Through this rehearsal the church tells the gospel story as it applies to this sister or brother, entrusting them to the life-giving care of the Lord. It gives thanks for his or her life and remembers the Triune God, the dead, and the body of Christ gathered in love for our sister or brother. As we remember and move through the ritual, we see the church in mission, moving in life through death to the

eternal living kingdom of God. This gospel story brings us Christ's almighty comfort and peace in the face of the dreadful foe, death. Through it all we remember this person and the bodily story in the gospel.<sup>21</sup>



21 Long, *Accompany Them With Singing*, 137–9.

# Reflection

How can the church best tell God's gospel story in Christ regarding your life at your funeral? Answering this question will lead to the decisions that need to be made to complete your funeral planning guide. In your planning how do you give thanks for, remember, and commend, your body which God created, into the hands of your Father until it is raised in the risen Christ on the day of his appearing?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# Task for the Week

This week in the planning guide, *Your Final Journey*, we want you to focus on the funeral ceremony itself. This begins with the section called: My Church Plans. In this section you will provide a guide for your pastor on how he will tell the story of your life in Christ through the funeral service and rites. Continue to work through that entire section throughout the week.

# Closing

This is the last word of blessing the pastor will speak over us when our bodies are laid to rest in the ground from which God crafted them:

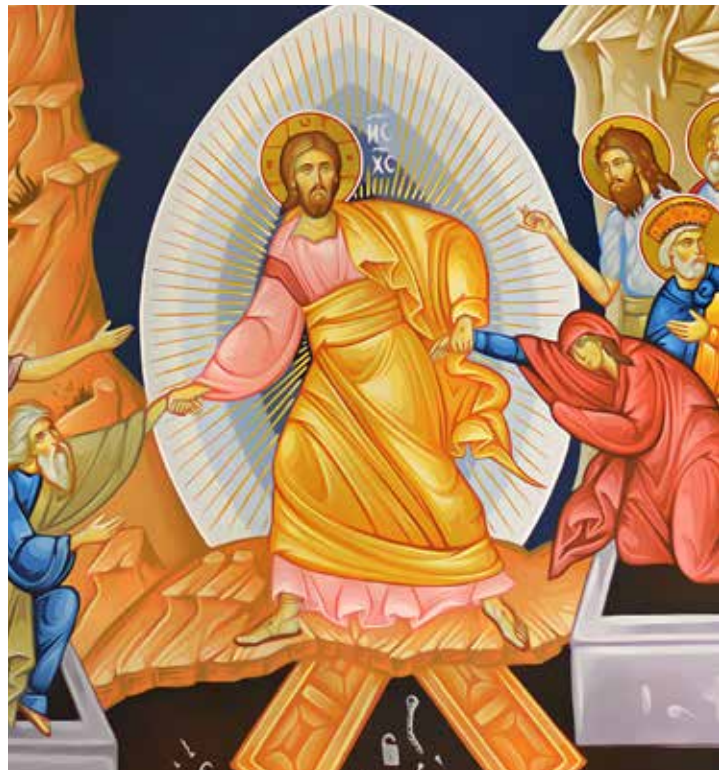
“May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by his blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh. Amen.”<sup>22</sup>

Jesus Christ, my sure defense  
And my Savior, now is living!  
Knowing this, my confidence  
Rests upon the hope here given,  
Though the night of death be fraught  
Still with many\_an anxious thought.

Then take comfort and rejoice,  
For His members Christ will cherish.  
Fear not, they will hear His voice;  
Dying, they will never perish;  
For the very grave is stirred  
When the trumpet's blast is heard.

I am flesh and must return  
To the dust, whence I am taken;  
But by faith I now discern  
That from death I shall awaken  
With my Savior to abide  
In His glory, at His side.

Glorified, I shall anew  
With this flesh then be enshrouded;  
In this body I shall view  
God, my Lord, with eyes unclouded;  
In this flesh I then shall see  
Jesus Christ eternally.



**LSB 741** *Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense* (sts. 1, 4–6)

Another appropriate hymn for reflection is *O Christ the Same*, Evangelical Lutheran Worship #760 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

22 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 130. Used with permission. cph.org.



# Week 5

---

## Burying the Body





## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions  
and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)

# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## **Opening Prayer**

Dear Jesus, death was not in your original plan. But we, your children, destroyed that plan and death must now be endured by every single creature of your creation. Although you warned us, we didn't listen. We seem to think we are mightier and wiser than you. When you died, you were lovingly placed inside the tomb. Help us Lord to love one another in a similar way. Help us to care for and walk alongside each other in life but also in death. Strengthen our faith and be our guide throughout our life's journey and turn us to your promise of everlasting life when death is near. Amen.



## **Contemplation**

This week the photo is of a community gathered for a funeral. Look at the faces of those surrounding the grave. Look at the mother and daughter as they mourn their loss. Consider the choir that is singing and the neighbor who dug the hole in which the body will soon be placed. Look off in the distance and see the two standing at the entrance to the yard. What things come to mind as you contemplate the image? Share your thoughts with each other.

# Introductory Video

Click on the link below to view the introductory video. Once you have viewed the video work through the group questions below to prepare you for this week's study.



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/5>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion

- 1** Burial, the end of a relationship. Once we have buried our loved one there is nothing else for us to do for them. It is simply the end. So, talk together as a group and discuss ways we can serve and help each other after the burial of a loved one. Reflect on helping each other not only immediately, but a week, a month, or even a year after that death has occurred.
- 2** Discuss as a group traditional burial practices. How do they differ from what you are discovering in this study? What stood out to you more than anything else?

# Bible Connections

“I am a sojourner and foreigner among you: give me property among you for a burying place, that I might bury my dead out of my sight.” (Gen 23:4).

“Then he commanded them and said to them, ‘I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite’” (Gen 49:29).

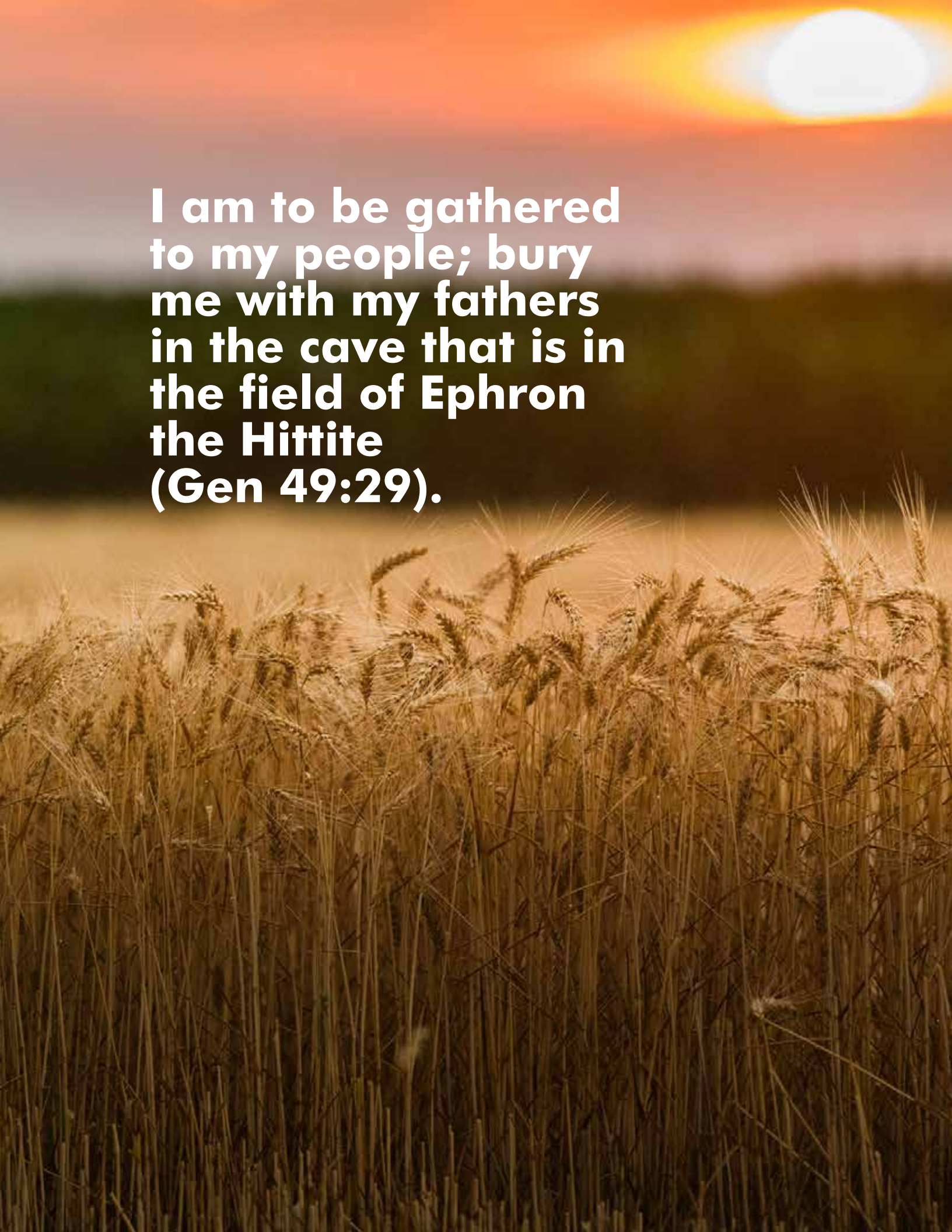
“Taking Jesus’s body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs” (John 19:40).

All three of these texts speak of burial. In Genesis 23 the foreigner asks for a place to bury his dead. Genesis 49 speaks of being gathered to his people in the cave. And then John’s Gospel speaks of Jesus’s body being wrapped with linen and spices in order to be placed in the grave or cave. All of these were done in accordance with Jewish burial customs. The burial custom was to lay the body out, anoint and wrap the body, and then carry it to its burial site, usually a cave or tomb. It was laid there until the body had decayed, usually about a year, when the family would return to gather the bones. The bones were collected (and sometimes added to bones of previous generations) and placed in an ossuary, a container or chamber for holding human bones. This is what is meant by “bury me with my fathers.”

Genesis 3:19 reminds us that we are taken from the dust of the earth and to the dust we will return: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” This is one of the reasons we are focusing this week on burial itself. We are not suggesting that cremation is wrong but we are suggesting that burial is the natural way to return our bodies to the earth from which we came.

Many quote Genesis 3:19 to substantiate cremation, but in the days of Old Testament Israel burning the body was forbidden and the Bible, does not speak of burning a body as a way of burial. During biblical times pagans would typically burn the remains of bodies, sometimes as a sacrifice to false gods.



A photograph of a field of golden wheat in the foreground, with a bright sun setting in the background, creating a warm, orange glow. The text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

**I am to be gathered  
to my people; bury  
me with my fathers  
in the cave that is in  
the field of Ephron  
the Hittite  
(Gen 49:29).**

# Digging In

So, digging in this week will be a bit more of a challenge. As we noted previously, this final step discontinues the relationship with our loved one. Here is where we say good bye for the last time. We've also come to the point in our Bible study where we will consider decisions about the final disposition of the body.

This week we will discuss the many options available for disposition of the body which include traditional burial, cremation, and natural burial, along with a few new options. We will also provide you with rough ideas on overall funeral costs and individual choices available to you.

After a death has occurred, traditionally, the first thing families do is call a funeral home. Have you ever wondered why? In America, until around the 1860s, all funerals were home funerals.<sup>23</sup> For hundreds of years the preferred practice was to be with loved ones as they died. In fact, the chance of a loved one not dying at home was extremely rare.<sup>24</sup> We washed them, dressed them, combed their hair, laid them out, and lamented through it all. Back then a neighbor might build the coffin for our loved one or wind the shroud, while others sat with the body, made meals for the family, or dug the grave. In those days, family and/or friends sat with the body for two or even three days. The reason? They wanted to make sure their loved one was truly dead. Once there were visible signs of decomposition, burying them alive was no longer a risk. Many of the options available today with natural burial mimic many of these same traditions of sitting with our dead.

Prior to the 20th century, funerals, especially in the United States, were organized by the family, church, and neighbors. The burial usually took place on family property or church property, and everyone participated in one way or another. Once communities grew and become more established, large cemeteries began to be used. Convinced that the family needed to be relieved of the problem of logistics and the care for their dead the funeral industry made its debut. Today without much thought, we simply turn our loved ones over to the industry, an industry usually of complete strangers.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Skovronek, "From Family Tradition and Back Again," Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA), <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> Skovronek, "From Family Tradition and Back Again."

It was not until around the 1930s that funeral professionals began completely to take over the traditional practices of caring for the body and burial. Undertakers began to see themselves on a more professional level along with doctors and lawyers. They studied human anatomy and viewed themselves as promoters of public health. As a result of professionalizing the industry people came to assume that a dead body posed a risk to public health and that professionals were necessary to handle the task of burial.<sup>25</sup> To this day, the funeral industry does not readily share that families have, and always have had, the right to care for their own dead. Today, funeral director, mortician, and undertaker have similar meanings, namely the person who supervises or conducts the preparation of the dead for burial. In addition, they may also direct or arrange the funeral itself.

## Traditional Burial

With a traditional burial, after the funeral director has been called and the body picked up, the body is not seen by family members or the church community until the visitation or the funeral itself. With traditional burial, there is very little, if any, contact with the body once it has been turned over to the funeral professionals.

The funeral home washes, embalms, dresses, and caskets the body. If the body will be viewed, prior to burial, make-up will be applied, and the hair may be washed and set. Everything will be done to make the dead look as alive or as close to “just sleeping” as possible.

Soon after the death the family will be shown casket options. Although caskets today cost on average \$2000, they can run as high as \$10,000 or \$20,000. These caskets are usually filled with synthetic materials, metals, non-degradable woods and fabrics. Today many people are choosing caskets that are advertised as “air tight,” supposedly to protect their loved ones from the elements. The question we need to ask ourselves is why we want to protect them and from what, as the point of burial is to allow the body to decompose.<sup>26</sup>

25 For further study on the funeral industry see <https://case.edu/ech/articles/f/funeral-homes-and-funeral-practices> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1963/06/the-undertakers-racket/305318/>. Both articles are written from a different perspective.

26 It might be of some interest that there have been stories that these air-tight caskets can actually explode from a dangerous buildup of gases and bacteria. See article in August of 2014, the Washington Post wrote an article called, “What You Should Know about Exploding Caskets.”

Traditional caskets almost always contain metals, including lead, zinc, copper and iron, adding acids to the soil. Many of the caskets are treated with varnishes and stains, which as they degrade release chemicals into the soil, much like with embalming. Why the concern over leakage into the soil? Because it has the potential for contaminating our water sources.

## Grave Liners and Burial Vaults

After the casket choice has been made and the body is placed inside the casket, it will be lowered into the ground which has been lined with a burial vault. A burial vault does nothing more than to protect the casket under the weight of the earth and the heavy equipment used at a cemetery. It preserves the beauty of the cemetery by preventing the ground from settling. Burial vaults are made of reinforced concrete that contain polystyrene liners or metal liners to hold the casket. Then a sealant is added between the lid and the box. The main goal is to keep the elements away from the casket. Of course, this option slows down the process of decomposition. At most traditional cemeteries they will require you to buy a burial vault and a grave liner. A grave liner is also a reinforced concrete box, but it contains drainage holes in the bottom and does not seal. Grave liners and burial vaults usually start around \$700–\$800 and can run as high as \$8,000–\$10,000. Options include eliminating the bottom of the grave liner, allowing the casket to sit directly on the ground itself which helps speed up the process of decomposing.

## Cremation

Cremation, as we know it today, only began a little over a century ago. Cremation is simply reducing a body into basic chemical compounds. The first cremator chamber that properly worked was displayed in 1873. The Cremation Society of England was created in 1874 by Sir Henry Thompson and his colleagues. The first crematories were built in Woking, England and Gotha, Germany in the year 1878. The first working crematory in the United States was opened in 1876 in Washington, Pennsylvania. At that time crematories were owned and operated by cremation societies. An early force behind cremation in America were Protestant clergy concerned with health conditions related to burial and so were looking to reform burial practices. By 1900 the United States had 20 working crematories and by 1913 there were 52 in North America. This was the same year Dr. Hugo Erichsen founded the Cremation Association of America. By 2009 approximately 36 percent of the deaths in the United States were handled by cremation.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *All Things Cremation*, Cremation Association of North America, <https://www.cremationsassociation.org>.



A photograph of a stone bench in a park. The bench is made of grey stone with a wooden seat. It is surrounded by a thick carpet of pink cherry blossom petals. In the background, there are large trees with green leaves and pink blossoms. The text "For hundreds of years the preferred practice was to be with loved ones as they died." is overlaid on the image in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**For hundreds of years  
the preferred practice  
was to be with loved  
ones as they died.**



Today there are two main ways to cremate a body. The well-known way is through flame-based cremation and the newest one on the market is alkaline hydrolysis. Flame-based cremation simply uses fire and heat to reduce the human body to bone fragments, in what is known as a cremator. Alkaline hydrolysis reduces the body remains to bone fragments through a water-based dissolution process using alkaline chemicals and heat, and sometimes with agitation and pressure. Basically, the body decomposes at a much faster rate by using chemicals.

As noted, in both processes the body is reduced down to bone fragments, called cremated remains. Neither the heat nor the hydrolysis process can breakdown these bones. Once the process is completed these bones are collected and placed in a processor called a cremulator that pulverizes the bones with blades until the remains are less than 1/8" in size. This is what is known as the "ashes."

In the flame-based process the temperature of the cremator averages 1400 to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Once this temperature is reached the body is placed inside the first chamber where body fat, tissue, organs, and the casket or other container, burn off as gases. From here the body enters a secondary chamber where combustion continues. Bone fragments remain in the first chamber. All other inorganic materials end up in the second chamber and the gases are released into the environment via a stack in the roof. The average cremation takes between one and three hours, although this varies based on body size and fat content. The process reduces the body to about three to seven pounds of cremains.

Emissions from cremation include gases and chemicals. Typically, the following chemicals are emitted into the air after and during a cremation: mercury, dioxin, hydrochloric acid, nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and dioxins. Mercury is the major concern for environmentally conscious individuals.<sup>28</sup>

The alkaline-hydrolysis process produces the same results, but through the use of a water-based machine that uses alkaline chemicals, heat, agitation, and pressure to accelerate decomposition. The body is placed in a chamber which holds approximately one hundred gallons of liquid. The water is then mixed with salt, sugars, amino acids, and peptides. This is called the "sterile effluent." This is then combined with the alkaline chemicals, either potassium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide or a combination of the two. The mix is 95 percent water (sterile effluent) and 5 percent chemicals. The body is then heated to between 199 to 302 degrees Fahrenheit in the container and pressure and/or agitation is added until the body is chemically cremated. The hydroxide breaks

28 Department of Public Health—State of Georgia, *Common Health Concerns about Crematory Operations*, <http://www.woodstockga.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1781/DPH---Crematories?bidId=>.

the bonds between chemicals in the body and converts them into basic building blocks. This process may take anywhere from three to sixteen hours to complete. The process leaves behind 32 percent more cremated remains than flame-based cremation. Once again, the bone fragments remain after the process is completed and are dried and then pulverized. The process is more environmentally friendly because it uses less fuel and has been shown to have a lower carbon footprint than the flame-based process.

Alkaline hydrolysis was first developed and patented in 1888 by a farmer looking to make fertilizer from his animal carcasses. In 1993 the first commercial system was installed at Albany Medical College to dispose of human cadavers. Universities and hospitals adopted the process mainly to dispose of donated bodies. The first ones used by the funeral industry began operation in 2011 in Ohio and Florida. Today there are fourteen states that have approved legislation for the use of alkaline hydrolysis. Today there are nineteen states that have approved legislation for the use of alkaline hydrolysis.<sup>29</sup>

## Natural Burial

Prior to the 1900s most of our dead were buried in a shroud (winding sheet) or a 6-sided coffin (also known as a “toe pincher”). This 6-sided coffin was favored for its shape as it kept the body tightly in place, but it also prevented the body from shifting while being transported. It also allowed the family to “cut corners,” literally, by tapering the rectangle at both ends, and so needed less burial space than a rectangular casket. This was very helpful to those who were digging a grave by hand.



29 “19 States Now Permit Alkaline Hydrolysis,” Arizona Funeral, Cemetery and Cremation Association, Memorial Business Journal, June 13, 2019, <https://azfccca.org/19-states-now-permit-alkaline-hydrolysis/>.

## Burial Shrouds



Burial shrouds are simple, eco-friendly, and usually affordable compared to conventional coffins or caskets. They are meant to wrap or shroud the body. Depending on the cemetery, a shrouded body can be placed directly into the ground or placed inside a simple coffin made of pine or a biodegradable willow casket. Once shrouded the body can be placed inside a simple coffin or casket to make it easier to transport the body. As noted in Week 3, shrouds are a beautiful way to adorn the body. Shrouds can range from a simple cotton or linen cloth to beautiful silks. Good shrouds usually have additional attachments such as lowering straps, to help lower the body into the ground, and a back board sewn into the spine of shroud, so that the body can be placed directly into the ground. Shroud prices can start around \$275 and run up to \$1200 depending on the cost of the material for the shroud and the nature of the board for transportation.

## Biodegradable Coffin and Casket Options

Coffin and casket options for natural burial vary in material, shape, and size but they all share one important characteristic, they are all biodegradable. The materials decompose with the body and at a much faster speed than traditional burial materials. A question that arose for me: Is there a difference between a coffin and a casket? The answer is yes, and it is basically a difference of design. Coffins usually have 6 or 8 sides and are tapered at the head and foot of the body and are wider at the shoulder, mimicking the body's shape. Caskets, on the other hand, are rectangular in shape and usually constructed with more expensive wood. They can certainly be constructed with biodegradable options but, traditional caskets contain expensive wood, metal, are lined with lots of fabric, and are embellished with metals, none of which are biodegradable. A jewelry box (a place where precious objects are stored) is also called a casket, so the funeral industry began designing caskets to reflect this language making caskets less offensive than coffins. The natural burial industry is slowly returning to the term coffin as a way of not shying away from death. Today biodegradable coffins and caskets can be made of lots of different materials.



## Cardboard Coffins

Cardboard, which many don't think of as proper material for a burial container, is truly a great option for burial. Most people quickly jump to the conclusion that cardboard equals cheap, but that is not the case. Cardboard caskets or coffins can be personalized. Families and loved ones can draw on them, paint them, and cover them with love notes to the one who has died. Cardboard coffins can tell the story of the person's life. When families participate in designing the burial coffin or casket many have claimed that it has helped them to process grief in new ways, with acts of love. It's a great way to involve children in the process of grieving. Cardboard coffins average around \$300. The one above shows an artist's handiwork.



## Woven Fiber Caskets

Woven fiber caskets or coffins are made from woven materials produced out of sustainable, biodegradable resources. They are usually lined with cotton or linen material and designed with built-in handles for carrying. They usually can carry a body weighing up to 350 pounds. Materials for woven fiber caskets include bamboo, cotton, rattan, willow, banana leaf, and seagrass. Woven fiber caskets are pretty to look at. They can run anywhere from \$950–\$2800.



## Pine Coffins or Caskets

Pine coffins provide mourners with the traditional coffin feel but with the eco-friendly component. Pinewood is a much softer wood than traditional casket woods. In addition, pinewood is a much more sustainable and renewable choice, as pine trees grow much faster and replenish themselves more quickly than hardwood and exotic trees. Pinewood is abundant in the United States. Pine coffins are usually hand-made, as compared to large manufacturing plants producing traditional hardwood caskets. Pinewood coffins contain no metal, or at least a very minimal amount (some use metal screws) and are not usually stained or sealed. Pinewood coffins or caskets can start as low as \$800 and run up to \$1800.

As you can see there are a lot of options when choosing natural burial containers or shrouds. The main point is to choose a container that will decompose naturally and once again become part of the earth. As noted earlier in the Bible study, natural burial practices do not use embalming fluids, nor do they allow for the use of vaults or burial liners. All of these choices make natural burial a much more environmentally sound option, as the materials are sustainable and renewable and have a much lighter carbon footprint on God's amazing creation.

You might consider being present when the casket is lowered into the ground. This helps mourners to face the reality of death. Most families leave before the coffin or casket is lowered in the ground. But stay and walk the final steps of burial with the dead. It is the last act of showing respect that leaves nothing undone for the dead.



## Filling the Grave

The service is now over and most of the time this is when everyone leaves the burial site, but we are going to ask you to consider remaining at the burial site. If you are at a cemetery that has opened the grave let them know that you will be staying until the grave is filled. Although this final step, shoveling dirt into the grave, might be one of the most difficult, it might also prove to be the most healing act in which you participate throughout the funeral and burial rites. This is the final act of honoring one's loved one. Although the sound of dirt hitting the shrouded body or hitting the casket can be haunting, it is the sound of finality. It is the final sound of death. But recognizing death makes it possible for the healing to begin. Check with the cemetery to see if they permit family to place dirt on the coffin or to stay for the filling of the grave. If so, consider participating in shoveling the dirt into the grave.



Once again don't leave the burying of the body to others. Participate in the burying of the body. Pick up a shovel and place the dirt on the coffin or casket. Allow yourself to mourn the loss of your loved one, remembering and trusting throughout it the resurrection of the body. Death is not the end. Death cannot, does not win! Jesus has conquered death and eternal life has come. Yes, your loved one lies dead in the grave, but that body will be raised just as Jesus was raised from the dead. This is the promise we hold on to.

# Reflection

Death has arrived. It will arrive for each of us, but we also have a promise spelled out clearly by Christ himself: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). Take a few moments with those around you or with the entire group and consider your death or a loved one’s death and then turn those thoughts to the resurrection of that body and eternal life with Christ.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# Task for the Week

We have arrived at the point where your body will be laid in its final resting place until the day of resurrection. In *Your Final Journey*, find the section Disposition of the Body. Here you will begin to make choices regarding what you want done with your body after the funeral service is finished. Will you be buried or cremated? If you desire to be buried, will your body be placed directly into the ground, wrapped in a shroud, or buried within a coffin or casket? You will also be asked to consider how you want your burial location to be marked: with a headstone or a more simple marker.



# Closing

The body in the grave we lay  
There to await that solemn day  
When God himself shall bid it rise  
To mount triumphant to the skies

And so to earth we now entrust  
What came from dust and turns to dust  
And from the dust shall rise that day  
In glorious triumph o'er decay

The soul forever lives with God,  
Who freely hath His grace bestowed  
And through His Son redeemed it here  
From ev'ry sin, from ev'ry fear.

All trials and all griefs are past,  
A blessed end has come at last.  
Christ's yoke was borne with ready will;  
Who dieth thus is living still.

We have no cause to mourn or weep;  
Securely shall this body sleep  
Till Christ Himself shall death destroy  
And raise the blessed dead to joy.

Then let us leave this place of rest  
And homeward turn, for they are blest  
Who heed God's warning and prepare  
Lest death should find them unaware.

So help us, Jesus, ground of faith;  
Thou hast redeemed us by Thy death  
From endless death and set us free.  
We laud and praise and worship Thee.<sup>30</sup>



**LSB 759** *This Body in the Grave We Lay*

30 From *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, 759. Used with permission. cph.org.

# Week 6

---

## Raising the Body



## **Lesson at a Glance**

---

***Opening Prayer and Contemplation*** (5 minutes)

***Introductory Video*** (10 minutes)

***Introductory Questions  
and Large Group Discussion*** (5 minutes)

***Bible Connections*** (10 minutes)

***Digging In*** (15 minutes)

***Reflection*** (5 minutes)

***Task for the Week*** (5 minutes)

***Closing: Review and Hymn*** (5 minutes)

## Hymn

If God Himself be for me,  
I may a host defy;  
For when I pray, before me  
My foes, confounded, fly.  
If Christ, my head and master,  
Befriend me from above,  
What foe or what disaster  
Can drive me from His love?

I build on this foundation,  
That Jesus and His blood  
Alone are my salvation,  
My true, eternal good.  
Without Him all that pleases  
Is valueless on earth;  
The gifts I have from Jesus  
Alone have priceless worth.

He canceled my offenses,  
Delivered me from death;  
He is the Lord who cleanses  
My soul from sin through faith.  
In Him I can be cheerful,  
Courageous on my way;  
In Him I am not fearful  
Of God's great Judgment Day.

No danger, thirst, or hunger,  
No pain or poverty,  
No earthly tyrant's anger  
Shall ever vanquish me.  
Though earth should break asunder,  
My fortress You shall be;  
No fire or sword or thunder  
Shall sever You from me.

No angel and no gladness,  
No throne, no pomp, no show,  
No love, no hate, no sadness,  
No pain, no depth of woe,  
No scheming, no contrivance,  
No subtle thing or great  
Shall draw me from Your guidance  
Nor from You separate.

My heart with joy is springing;  
I am no longer sad.  
My soul is filled with singing;  
Your sunshine makes me glad.  
The sun that cheers my spirit  
Is Jesus Christ, my King;  
The heav'n I shall inherit  
Makes me rejoice and sing.

**LSB 724** *If God Himself Be for Me* (sts. 1–2, 4, 8–10)  
Another appropriate hymn for reflection is *Neither Death  
nor Life, Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #622 (Minneapolis:  
Augsburg Fortress, 2006).







**Neither height, nor depth,  
nor all of creation can ever  
separate us from the love  
of God poured out in Christ  
Jesus, our Lord.**



# Opening Prayer and Contemplation

## **Opening Prayer**

Lord of all life, Christ Jesus, in your earthly life you embraced death through your passion and crucifixion. Yet, death had no power over you. From the tomb in which your followers laid your body, you revealed true human life, life united to the living God. In your tomb death lies defeated, the dread of its sting destroyed forever. You live, and in your life, we have life. As the course of our life hurries on, help us to die daily to the flesh, to our sinful selves, to evil, to all that does not flow from your life-giving Spirit. Then, on the day when this earthly life ebbs to its close, lead us to surrender our bodily life in death to you, the one in whom our bodies will be refashioned by your Father. So, bring us to the finale of our faith, to our own resurrection Easter day in you. Amen.



## **Contemplation**

Questions to help guide contemplation: The pictures above and on page 88 show natural burial settings. What strikes you about these photographs? Are there any unusual juxtapositions? How do those juxtapositions make you feel? How does the previous hymn and prayer help you to spiritually process those juxtapositions? How do they all tell the true end of our story?

# Introductory Video

Click on the link below to view the introductory video. Once you have viewed the video work through the group questions below to prepare you for this week's study.



## URL

Type this URL into your web browser:

<http://scholar.csl.edu/naturalburial/6>

## Questions for Large Group Discussion

- 1 How do you feel thinking about your own burial?
- 2 What should the gospel story of your body lead you to feel and think about your own burial?
- 3 What is the end of your story to which your own burial points?
- 4 How comfortable are you right now in preparing for your own funeral and burial?

# Bible Connections

## Bodily Hope

*Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17*


Burying the bodies of our loved, baptized brothers and sisters might seem like a hopeless act, a depressing requiem to life. A body four feet under the ground, with the prospect of bodily decomposition back into the earth. That is the reality of the consequences of death. Death returns us to the earth from which we came. No bodily form, no life, seemingly no hope. Yet, Paul in this passage says, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yes, when we place them in the ground it looks like sleep, but we know the real deal. They will not wake from their sleep. But Paul says, “Hold your belief-horses.” Christians do not grieve as others with no hope. Our bodies are, contrary to what we know and see, just sleeping for a time. Because we believe that Jesus died and rose so God will in him raise those who have died. Our death-sleep will end. Those buried bones will live. When the Lord descends from heaven he will command with a cry and the sound of God’s trumpet that the dead come forth (just as he did at Lazarus’s tomb). And the decomposed bodies of the dead will be reconstituted through God’s living Word, Jesus, and will meet the Lord in the air (see Ezekiel 37:1–14, the Valley of the Dry Bones, a prophetic account of the end times resurrection of the dead of God). There is great hope for the bodies we naturally return to the earth. God will by the power of his spoken word recreate them from the place where they were laid in death. (This applies to those whose bodies are cremated. This is also an argument for burying cremains or placing them in a mausoleum or other appropriate burial chamber, signifying that they are returning to the ground from whence they originally came and from which God will raise them.)

## Bodily Resurrection

*Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–28, 35–57*

Natural burial practices point to the transformation of our bodies when the Lord raises them from the earth in which they were buried. We bury bodies in the ground so that they will decay, be absorbed back into the earth from which God created them.





**At the resurrection we will  
have new bodies, spiritual  
bodies, the embodied  
manifestation of the risen  
Christ's body that fills your  
new body.**



Someone has asked Paul in the context of 1 Corinthians 15, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Corinthians 15:35). You may wonder that yourself. If our bodies decay completely with nothing left except bones—and are destroyed by death, what kind of bodies will we have at the resurrection? If they dissolve into the ground or get mixed with the bodies of others in common graves, how can God restore our bodies at the resurrection? Will it be the same DNA, the same identity, the same personal me? Of course it will be the same me, for nothing is impossible with God! This is part of the mystery of the resurrection. Somehow God will recreate our bodies so that they have continuity with our current earthly bodies—same DNA, same identity, same me. Yet, they will also be very different, new, transformed. As Paul says,

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42–44)

At the resurrection we will have new bodies, spiritual bodies, the embodied manifestation of the risen Christ’s body that fills your new body. We place our baptized, beloved saints into the earth that God created because we trust the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We want him to transform the old, decaying bodies we place into the ground so that he can recreate them and bring to completion our baptism. We want God to transform the natural into the eternal. We long for what Paul confesses in 1 Corinthians 15:51–57:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”  
 “O death, where is your victory?”  
 O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Bodily Eternal Life in the Alpha and the Omega

*Read Romans 8:19–27*

Something new is happening. Can you feel it? In fact, it doesn't look like anything new is happening. It often looks like more decay around us, especially when death rears its ugly head. It's the same old-same old, one death after another. But ever since the appearance of the new Elijah (John the Baptist) who begins the restoration of all things (Mark 9:9–13), God has been doing a new thing. Paul indicates what this new thing is: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:19–21). Bondage to corruption will end when God sets his children free in his glory. And all the cosmos will be set free, no longer compelled to death, decay, and corruption. Obtaining the glory God intended for his creatures and his creation happens through the redemption of our bodies. And that redeeming, that buying back of our bodies from death and corruption, happens through the dying and rising of Jesus. His death and resurrection is the first fruit of bodily redemption. Through his resurrection life, in his body, our bodies will be raised and live with him in his kingdom of peace and love. And the whole creation, groaning until then, will be pulled, along with the redemption of our bodies in Jesus's body, to its own redemption: a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1–2).

*Read Revelation 22:1–21*

The new heaven and the new earth that the Lord is creating is part of the something new that is happening. John sees a vision of it in the revelation that the Lord gives to him. At the center of the new heaven and the new earth is the city of God, where God's throne is located and from which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will reign. The Triune God's reign brings life to all the new cosmos: a river that is the water of life, the tree of life with its fruit, and leaves from the tree which heal the nations. And the light of God is the shining sun, illuminating all the cosmos. Through the One who is coming, the Lamb who was crucified and rose again, the church will enter into that eternal kingdom. In our bodies we will enter God's great city. As John says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates" (Revelation 22:14). Those bodily washed in the waters of the river of Life, baptized into the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, will enter the new heaven and new earth. As I indicate in *Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation*:

In heaven on earth we will be united to the eternal life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Jesus promises in John 17:20–21. . . . We will live and move and have our being in the triune God, in eternal communion with God. . . . At the center of communion with the triune God in heaven on earth is Christ, the One who still is and eternally will be God and humanity united in one. He is at the center of our living in relationship with the Father and the Spirit who cannot be seen. Even after God establishes His rule and reign following the Day of Judgment, God the Father continues to mediate life to us through the Word made flesh, crucified and raised for us. Everything we will do—breathing, thinking, loving (to name a few)—we will do in Christ. God will transform our lives in Christ and through Christ. The water of life and the tree of life that John describes in Revelation 22 will feed us (Revelation 21:6), and that river and that tree of course are Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

So, we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, and lead us in our recreated bodies on the last journey to your eternal home. Amen.”

32 Burreson, Kent and Beth Hoeltke, *Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and The New Creation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2019).



## Questions to discuss:

- What other scripture texts come to mind that reflect the hope of the bodily resurrection?
- How is burial and the promise of the resurrection the completion of your baptism and baptismal journey?
- Can you put into your own words how the practices of natural burial reflect our trust that God will recreate our bodies at the resurrection on the last day?



# Digging In

People often arrive at their own deaths having done very little planning for their own funerals. Imagine how difficult it is for your loved ones in the throes of grief and sorrow to think about all the things that need to be determined for your funeral and burial to take place. Planning your own funeral is simply an act of hospitable love for your church, your pastor, and the family who loves you. Yet, it is even more than that. Planning our own funerals is an act of preparation for our death and the resurrection of our bodies. Planning our own funerals helps us to confront the enemy, death, and to grapple with it. We do not want to despair and live as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). When we plan our funerals, we confess that death for us will simply be a period of sleep. We will awaken, our bodies and our spirits, from physical death. Our bodies will decay. But God will raise us and our perishable bodies that are sown into the ground. From what is sown God raises a new imperishable body. We plan our funerals so that we can proclaim and confess this truth boldly even before we die. We plan our funerals knowing that the earthly grave is not the end for our bodies. Death is swallowed up in the victory of Christ's resurrected life.

## A Spectrum of Practices

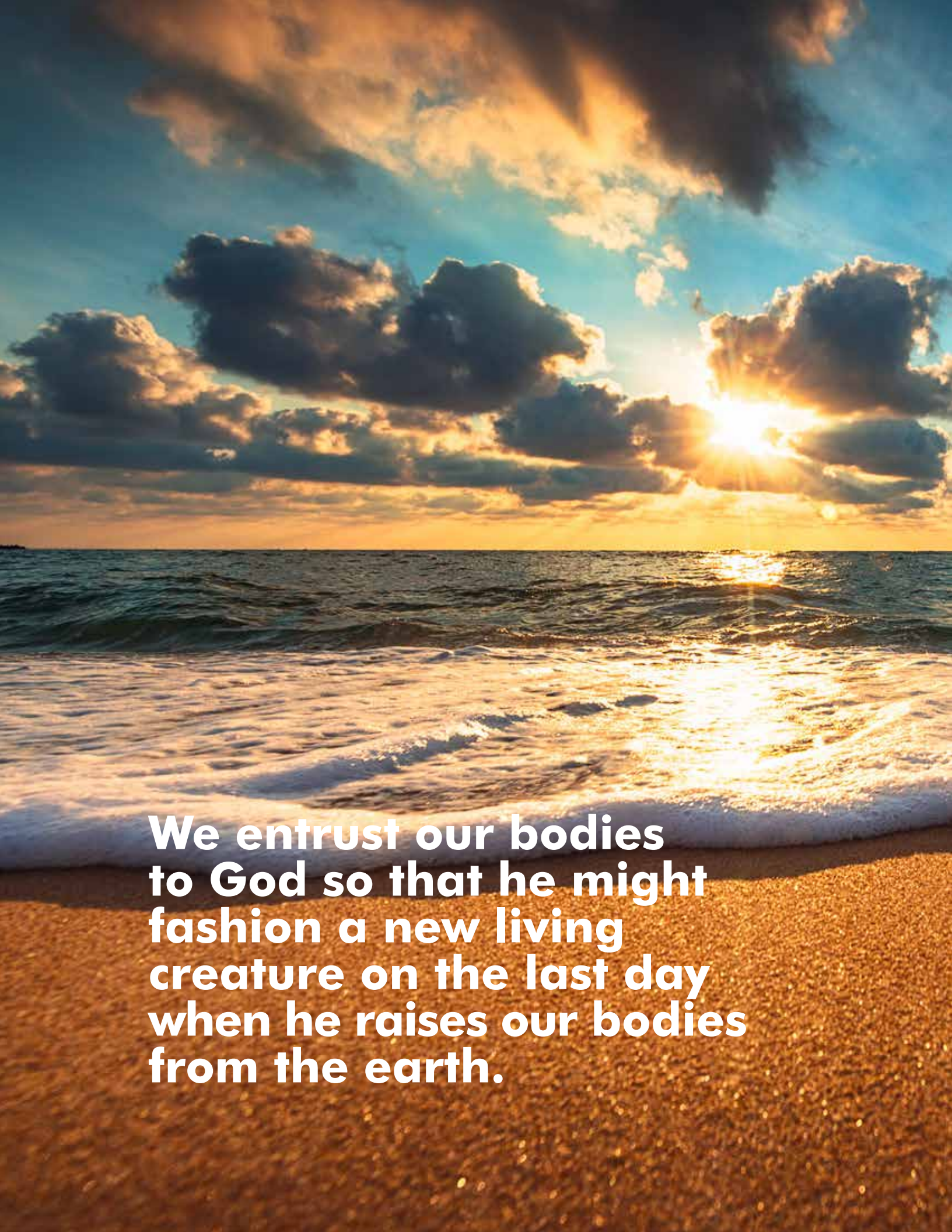
In planning our funeral, it is important to observe that one doesn't have to swallow all the practices of natural burial, hook, line, and sinker! While we would encourage you to consider all the potential practices of natural burial, what contemplating natural burial does is to open a spectrum of more natural, green possibilities. As we have seen, the possibilities include, at minimum: no embalming; no traditional caskets and vaults; and burial directly in the ground within a cemetery that practices natural burial. But the possibilities certainly don't end there! Attending to your body's resting place encourages you to consider other moves away from the "American way of death." These include at least three areas of attention: the care of your body as you are dying through the final placement of your body in the ground; the funeral rite through which the Christian community bears you, a brother or sister in Christ, to your resting place until the last day; and the actual interment of your body in the ground and how it is done. All the things we have outlined in this study as possible practices in a natural way of burial, are plotted on a spectrum. Whether you embrace all of them, or only embrace one or two, in whatever you do you are moving toward practices that reflect the life that God bodily created from the earth and the hope of the body that God will recreate from the earth at the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Earth to Earth: In the Ground

The Lord God fashions our bodies from the earth. When we return our bodies to the earth from which they were formed, we entrust them to God. We entrust them to him so that he might fashion a new living creature on the last day when he raises our bodies from the earth. Until that day, by entrusting our bodies in natural ways to the good earth God created, we ensure that the burial of our bodies has the least negative impact, and hopefully a positive beneficial impact, on the environment. That positive impact includes the benefits to the soil and the plants near our burial site through the natural decomposition of our bodies. For the best possible impact in natural burial our bodies should be buried 3.5 to 5 feet below the ground with a 2 to 3 feet mound of earth on the top of the burial site. Eventually that mound will flatten out naturally. Burial at 3.5 to 5 feet ensures that the body is placed within a higher soil stratum where the nutrient layer is rich in microbes and oxygen, efficiently aiding in returning the body to the earth. The bottom of each grave may be lined with a 1- to 2-inch thick layer of woodchips, palm fronds, evergreen boughs or other plants to further fortify the natural return of the body to God's earth. And there is no risk to polluting the earth or contaminating the drinking table with natural burial. Our dead bodies are not polluted or contaminated. When placed directly in the ground, the soil is a great natural filter, breaking down all chemical compounds in our bodies. We emit more toxic chemicals into the environment when we are living than when our bodies decompose. Wild animals will not dig up corpses as they cannot scent a buried body beyond 18 inches underground. While each of our bodies and the circumstances of our burials are different, on average it takes 6 weeks for soft tissue to decompose and 2–3 years for our entire bodies to fully decompose and return to the earth. The only thing that remains, at that point, are our bones. The soil will absorb them, especially if it is moist, after 20 years. It is important to remember that such decomposition happens to every body, sooner or later, even when embalmed and in a sealed casket and vault. It just takes longer in a so-called sealed environment. Our bodies return to God's good earth much more quickly with natural burial. When we place our bodies naturally in God's good earth to await the day of resurrection, we are crying out in faith and hope to the Lord for his recreative and resurrecting act as in the words of the psalmist in Psalm 51:7–10:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
 Let me hear joy and gladness;  
 let the bones that you have broken rejoice.  
 Hide your face from my sins,  
 and blot out all my iniquities.  
 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
 and renew a right spirit within me.





**We entrust our bodies  
to God so that he might  
fashion a new living  
creature on the last day  
when he raises our bodies  
from the earth.**



Our bones, entrusted to God in his earth, like the earth itself, will live again and they will rejoice when he breathes the spirit of life into them once more.



## Natural Burial Grounds

For those who, in planning their funerals, decide they want to be buried without a vault and in a biodegradable coffin/casket/shroud, this also will necessitate burial in a natural burial cemetery, since most traditional cemeteries require the use of vaults and encourage the use of non-biodegradable caskets. Natural Burial cemeteries do the following things:

- Forego toxic embalming
- Do away with vaults
- Choose biodegradable containers, caskets, shrouds, urns
- Discontinue herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers
- Encourage sustainable management practices
- May use GPS units, natural stone markers to mark grave sites
- May support land conservation efforts.

While the number of natural burial cemeteries throughout the country is relatively small, they are growing in number. A non-profit agency that can be of help in locating a natural burial cemetery is the Green Burial Council (GBC), [www.greenburialcouncil.org](http://www.greenburialcouncil.org). Their mission is “to inspire and advocate for environmentally sustainable, natural death care through education and certification” and their vision is “to ensure universal access to information and environmentally sustainable death care.”<sup>33</sup> Not all green

33 Green Burial Council, [https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our\\_mission.html](https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_mission.html).



burial cemeteries are certified by the Green Burial Council (for example, Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina, the first Natural Burial cemetery in the country, is not GBC certified), and so are not on their website, however, the majority of natural burial cemeteries are certified by the GBC. Currently there are 69 GBC certified cemeteries, among at least 100 natural burial cemeteries.

The GBC classifies natural burial cemeteries by three categories: Hybrid Cemetery, Natural Burial Ground, and Conservation Burial Ground. The following definitions come from the GBC website.

Hybrid cemeteries are: “A conventional cemetery that offers the essential aspects of natural burial, either throughout the cemetery or in a designated section. GBC certified hybrids do not require vaults and must allow for any kind of eco-friendly, biodegradable burial containers, such as shrouds and soft wood caskets.”

Natural Burial Grounds are: “A cemetery dedicated in full to sustainable practices/protocols that conserve energy, minimize waste, and do not allow the use of toxic chemicals, any part of a vault (lid, slab, or partitioned liner), markers made of non-native stone, and burial containers not made from natural/plant derived materials.”

Finally, a Conservation Burial Ground is: “A type of natural cemetery that is established in partnership with a conservation organization and includes a conservation management plan that upholds best practices and provides perpetual protection of the land according to a conservation easement or deed restriction.”<sup>34</sup>



A Hybrid Cemetery



A Natural Burial Ground

34 Green Burial Council, [https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/burial\\_grounds\\_cemeteries.html](https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/burial_grounds_cemeteries.html).

## Conclusion

Throughout these six weeks we have explored natural burial and its spectrum of possibilities from within a biblical perspective. Hopefully, you have been able to glimpse the ways in which natural burial practices affirm and confess the gospel story of God's recreation of our bodies through his Son Jesus Christ. From preserving the body in natural ways without embalming, to placing it in biodegradable containers directly in the ground, to burying in cemeteries which care for the earth as God has called his creatures to do: all of these confess God as our creator and recreator. And hopefully you have begun to prepare for your death by planning your funeral and through it telling your story as God has encompassed it in his story through Christ and by the Spirit. Your body comes from the dust and to thence it will return. Yet, a more glorious future awaits. For your grave is the place where the seed will sprout, your resurrected body, glorified in Christ Jesus. Here's to a funeral and burial that honors that baptized body!



A Conservation Burial Ground



## Reflection

After completing this Bible study how comfortable are you now in preparing for your own funeral and burial? Have your thoughts and feelings changed? Hopefully they have. Hopefully you see how preparing for your own funeral and burial is an act of confessing the resurrection of your body at Jesus's appearing. How are you incorporating the confession of your resurrection in Jesus into your funeral and burial?

# Task for the Week

We have now come to the final steps of the burial process. This section is called Final Plans and Wishes in *Your Final Journey*. The guide asks you to list the names of those you consider Good Samaritans. These are friends or people you know who can assist your family during the difficult time following your death. They can make phone calls, run errands, assist in caring for your body, etc. Their loving service allows those who love you to focus on walking alongside you throughout this journey. This section also includes a place for you to leave a note to your loved ones. This may be the opportunity to say a final goodbye. It may be a final statement of your faith. It will be your final words of love and gratitude. Cherish this opportunity.

## Closing

The resting place for our bodies is holy space in which we entrust our bodies to the Creator who designed them and will return them to new life on the last day. The prayer over our graves in the LSB committal rite blesses our resting places in this way: “O Lord Jesus Christ, by your three-day rest in the tomb you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you, promising resurrection to our mortal bodies. Bless the graves in which our bodies will rest that we may sleep there in peace until you awaken us to glory, when we will see you face to face and know the splendor of the eternal God, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”



# Hymn

Sing with all the saints in glory, raise  
Sing the resurrection song!  
Death and sorrow, earth's dark story,  
To the former days belong.  
All around the clouds are breaking;  
Soon the storms of time shall cease;  
In God's likeness we awaken,  
Knowing everlasting peace.

Oh, what glory, far exceeding  
All that eye has yet perceived!  
Holiest hearts for ages pleading  
Never that full joy conceived.  
God has promised, Christ prepares it;  
There on high our welcome waits.  
Ev'ry humble spirit shares it,  
Christ has passed the eternal gates.

Life eternal! Heav'n rejoices:  
Jesus lives who once was dead.  
Shout with joy, O deathless voices!  
Child of God, lift up your head!  
Life eternal! Oh, what wonders  
Crowd on faith; what joy unknown,  
When, amid earth's closing thunders,  
Saints shall stand before the throne!



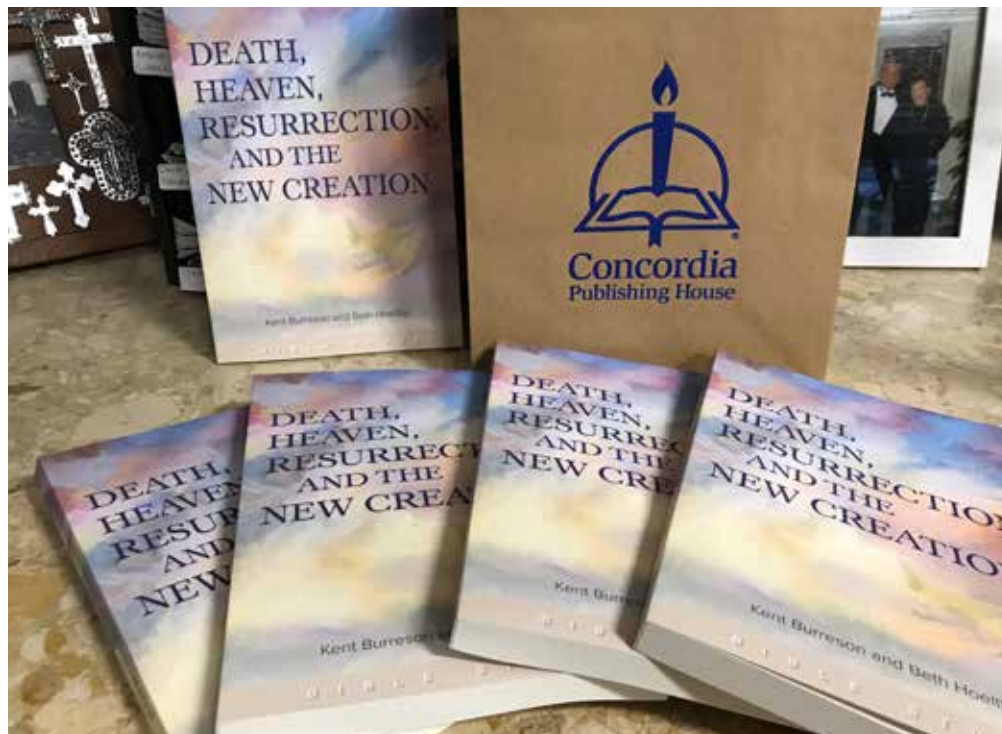
**LSB 671** *Sing with All the Saints in Glory*

## Notes



## Notes





Check out our new book released Feb. 2019

Photo Credits: p4, p18, p48, p70, WikiArt. p2, p10, p12, p29, p90, p101, Bellefontaine Cemetery. p. 19, Author [St. Benedict the African Roman Catholic Church, Chicago, Illinois]. p50, The Somerset Willow Company, Somerset, England, United Kingdom. p54, p88, p96, p103, Memorial Ecosystems, Ramsey Creek Preserve, Westminster, South Carolina p100, The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery, Mt. Elliott Cemetery Association, Waterford, Michigan. p101, Memorial Park Funeral Home and Cemetery, Memphis TN; NorthStar Memorial Group. p102, Northumbrian Woodland Burials of Northumberland, ENGLAND [Photo: Nigel John <https://nigeljohn.com/>]

