

It's Even Better with a Body

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Each semester over the last several years, I've had the honor of speaking to Duke Divinity School students in the preaching classes of Dr. Charles Campbell. This usually occurs at our funeral home in combination with a facilities tour and overview of the process from notification to disposition. Once, upon check-in, I told Chuck we had several decedents and families in our care—that the class would be observing us in action. He replied, “Well okay, it's even better with a body.”

After stumbling into funeral service at college in a Dutch Reformed enclave in the mid 1970s, I know that bodies were given more attention back then. Families eagerly awaited word as we worked feverishly to make ready for first viewing; choosing complementary clothing, insuring adequate transportation, and assigning pallbearers was all done intentionally and carefully. Rarely would the dead be absent from their own funeral or promptly disposed sans any rites. I am envious of my senior mentors who remember going to homes to prepare the dead and lay them out in the parlor with the help of family. It was full immersion into mortality, recruiting kin and comrades into familiar roles to accomplish the tasks of caring for the dead and consequently the living. Death was weightier then. Humankind was more humane for it. Locally today, we are recovering some semblance of this with pre-funeral vigils held in churches.

The rising American preference for disembodied memorial events, frequently titled “celebrations of life,” lacks this metaphor of the incarnate—the singular role of the deceased that matters in this sacred play about life, death, and the life to come. Most church rubrics were scored with the dead in attendance, but an aversion to traditions now considered passé and a desire to “make it easier on everybody” has caused huge shifts in practices. This has become well enculturated in many faith communities and locales, where prompt cremation has replaced the “full bodied” ceremony rather than a post-service alternative to cemetery burial as it is on other continents. While childbirth is messy and baptism wet, there is this odd disconnect at death—avoiding the actual body in a box, though no spouse or partner would ever decline standing in the maternity suite (at the ready with i-camera). The unvarnished boldness and gravitas thereof is perhaps too reminiscent of death—better tamed when transformed to compact ash or buried privately with restricted participation. Undertaker and poet Thomas Lynch states accurately his take as a cultural ball-drop:

And this formula—dealing with death by dealing with the dead... worked for humans for forty or fifty thousand years all over the planet, across every culture until we come to the most recent generations of North Americans who, for the past forty or fifty years, have begun to outsource and ignore their obligations to deal with the dead. They are willing enough to keep “their presence in the memory of descendants,” (the idea of the thing), so long as they don't have to deal with “the treatment of deceased bodies,” (the thing itself). A picture on the piano is fine, but public wakes, bearing the dead to open graves or retorts, is strictly out of fashion.¹

So, these seminarians, many never having seen a corpse up close, stand quietly before the few in house with mixed looks of curiosity, awe, reticence. Watching them ignites a flashback to 14-year-old Christopher who committed suicide with a .22 to the temple. Baptism by fire. This was the first embalming I ever observed, seated on a stool in the corner of the prep room, chilled to the bone, yet galvanized to pursue this vocation trafficking in human crisis. Questions and comments around psychology and eschatology start popping—is viewing ever ill advised? Is your objective to make them look alive? How has being in close quarters with the dead shaped your own faith? Wouldn't it be better to opt out of viewing and encourage a more spiritual trajectory? Allen Verhey, in *The Christian Art of Dying*, makes this case for the treatment and place of the dead:

We are embodied selves, and communal selves as embodied...Caring attentiveness to the “mortal remains” is a token of care and respect both for the one who has died and for those who grieve. The person is dead; the body will decay; relationships are broken; communities are dismembered. But the body was once—and still is—identified with the person who is dying. The body was once—and still is—the medium by which we display the affection, loyalty, and honor due the person.²

The future pastors will hopefully keep grappling with the body questions, what with CPE around the corner and dead congregants and broken hearts over whom they will soon preside. “So rabbi and preacher, pooh-bah, and high priest do well to understand the deadly pretext of their vocation,” asserts Lynch, in framing death beside faith. “But for mortality, there'd be no need for churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues.”³

Edwin Searcy relates a poignant discussion in his church's adult forum, “Dying Faithfully,” over why coffins are no longer brought into Protestant memorial worship. The answers suggested the longtime fashionable choice of simplicity, disconnection from family in a mobile society, and the willingness of clergy to accommodate “whatever the family wants” because, it is assumed, death is an individual matter. One of the attendees, a European minister on sabbatical, expressed shock upon learning Searcy seldom led a funeral over a body. At the next forum gathering, this woman related her experiences of “the crucial importance of having the evidence of death present at every funeral.”⁴ Searcy writes, “It was as if we were hearing again for the first time what it is to look death in the eye in order to proclaim the power of God at the grave.”⁵ The women entered the dark tomb, filled with dread and fear, as Mark vividly depicts what it is to stare into the gaping maw of death (Mark 16:1-8).

He was popular, this newly minted and kind young priest with movie-star ministry—a smooth presider and crisp speaker. Because of his exceptional gifts for ministry, I could not remain silent that day at the graveyard. An adult son with moderate emotional disabilities, the youngest of five, lay down in a fetal position at his mother's grave and proceeded to howl inconsolably like a hyena. The well-meaning cleric knelt by him, repeatedly declaring within earshot of all, “David, your mom did *not* die. She is right here *with* you!” Finally, I interceded, asking Father to join me for a short walk. Silence and gentle presence are sufficient in such intense moments, I advised. Though tempted to take him on about souls, spirits, and bodies, I stopped

at sharing a simple wish he'd one day find himself uttering, "We don't know... much is a mystery... but we must live in hope."

An additional factor behind downplaying a corpse may owe to the common view of laity (and some clergy) in an immortal soul separating from the body, relegating remains to an empty vessel with little ceremonial value. The language that has wormed its way into some of the canons is troubling for its easy misinterpretation. For instance, in Catholic and some Anglican texts, we hear mid-Eucharist, "life is changed, not ended."⁶ With inimitable wit, Frederick Buechner addresses dualism sharply: "The idea that the body dies and the soul doesn't... implies the body is something rather gross and embarrassing like a case of hemorrhoids. The Greeks spoke of it as a prison house for the soul.... The Bible, on the other hand, sees the body in particular and the material world in general as a good and glorious invention."⁷ Searcy identifies what is at stake absent a biblically-rooted, Judeo-Christian understanding of human nature: "The unity of body and soul is crucial for Christians. It is what links our funeral practices with our concern for social justice. If we cannot carry the burden of each other's bodies in death, then surely we will find it even more difficult to carry the burden of others, beyond our circle in life."⁸

It requires hard work for faith leaders to unpack a theology of death and resurrection, taking the deep dive into scripture, the creeds, and scholarly examination to counter the Platonic position of "escaping my old and tired body to get to heaven" versus the joining of heaven and earth into a new creation. I get these questions from time to time on what I believe about afterlife, and the best answer I've discovered is from Dr. William Klein, in describing a conversation with a grief-racked widower friend and an acquaintance who asks the widower if he believed in life after death. "No," he said bravely. "The questioner turned to me; a minister is supposed to have the answer for such things. 'I don't believe in life after death either,' said I. 'Instead I believe in the God of the living who raised His Son from the dead and never forgets His own.' Besides, whether or not we believe in eternal life is really irrelevant, eternal life is always God's gift to the dead, never a reward for believing, nor is it an inherent right we can claim."⁹

Dialogue with Dr. Campbell's class moved to planning and directing funeral liturgy and pastoral challenges like navigating potential landmines—eulogies, the US flag on the coffin, or sentimental ditties, e.g. dove releases and helium balloons. I stress keen focus on the service title: "A Service of Death and Resurrection," or "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection." Generations of tradition, theological integrity, and poetic language make the case for sticking with "the book" as reliable grounding while remaining nimble enough to accommodate reasonable individual nuance. A funeral's power—the power ultimately heralding the Easter story—always involves an assembly in movement, whether across the sod to an open grave, to the crematorium, or into and out of the worship venue.

Tom Long, a contributor of substantial scholarly endeavor on funerals, notes, "The choreography of a funeral, involving a processional moving across the land, tells an enacted story about life, death, and hope. To accompany the dead from 'here' to 'there' is to enact a ritual story with a beginning, a middle, and an end."¹⁰ If the music or other elements tank, a good funeral can still be pulled off when if nothing else, under a baptismal pall, comes a coffin down the aisle followed by family, with the presider intoning, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." These are moments of

the Church at her best. Finally, I cover the importance of staging, making use of the church's abundant resources—the pall, the font, or sprinkling in the recited reminder of baptism (Romans 6:4). The spoken word grieving folk can absorb has limits, and indeed senses are enhanced to such non-verbal gesture, symbols, and notably the soul-stirring energy of hymns welling up from our marrow.

But how, with resurrection central to funeral worship, do we enable joy and grief to co-exist? At death, the exclamation of resurrection delight can inadvertently squeeze out room for lament. Grief cannot be ignored nor an end run made around the barrenness and anguish of Good Friday in our dash to Easter. Scott Miller, in commenting on the 1993 revisions to the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship (BCW), argues, “The current rite still seems too eager to offer the comfort and hope of the resurrection and too reluctant to stay with the pain and sorrow of death.”¹¹ Certainly, this holds true across the denominational landscape. Many of my Catholic friends of a former era recall wistfully the Requiem Mass with its foreboding mood of deathly darkness—the black pall and vestments and mysterious Latin text including the sobering *Dies Irae*, heavy on judgment, though containing incredibly hopeful language of tenderness and mercy. Against the post Vatican II more up-beat liturgies, decked in gleaming white, it raises worthy questions of balance. Miller articulates the compatibility of lament and resurrection hope: “Lament, I contend, is what nourishes the church's witness to the resurrection. The alleluias that spring from lament may be ‘tearful,’ but they are never shallow. They boldly cry out from the depths the staggering gospel truth ‘Christ is risen...and so are all who have died in Christ!’ The funeral rite, at its best, allows such a ‘tearful alleluia’ to be expressed.”¹²

Funerals done well are “mini Easters”—practice runs for holy week leading to the feast day of resurrection. Following the “Dying Faithfully” series at Searcy's congregation, he focused on recovering the cruciform pattern of the gospel in worship, education, outreach, and communal life, with equal weight ascribed to Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. The forum group concluded that current memorial services have simply borrowed from a culture attempting to figure out what to do upon death. Searcy describes the cruciform pattern as it relates to funerals:

Our practices reveal that we have forgotten the cruciform logic of the gospel. At the time of death the Christian community rehearses the death that birthed its life. Gathered at the grave we live through the three-day figure of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. The gospel is not simply the joy of Easter. It is not simply announcing that death is over, as if it is not real. Rather, the gospel is a narrative of a death that we live within. We are living in the gospel if we are face to face with a terrible ending that devastates all our hopes and dreams. The gospel begins always on this awful Friday.... Then, when death breaks in upon the life of the community, the church instinctively knows what to do and what to say as a people shaped by the story of God made known in Christ.¹³

Our firm's clientele is ethnically diverse, and among those we serve is the Greek Orthodox community. I've been undertaking their funerals for nearly twenty-five years. My co-workers and I know the drill by heart—the supplies and equipment to bring, which candles to light and when, and the many moving parts. It slipped my

mind that day standing on the elevated solea just as we had turned the casket for the final farewell greeting. We routinely put the resurrection icon on a stand to the side and moved it to the foot of the casket at the farewell, allowing the assembly to reverence the icon with a kiss while walking past the open casket before exiting church. A parishioner friend left his seat and approached me discreetly: “You forgot the icon.” “Yes, I’ll handle it,” I replied. “Ok,” he admonished, “Ya know, it’s not a proper funeral without it.” How very astute. The theatrical resurrection icon of victory shouts, “Christos Anesti!”—“Christ is Risen!” In the image, a white robed Jesus has broken through the gates of hell, scattering the darkness and freeing humankind from death as represented by Christ pulling Adam and Eve from their tombs. It is also expressed musically throughout Easter in the haunting Paschal troparion:

Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And upon those in the tombs bestowing life!

Chuck Campbell gets it right. It’s even better with a body at funerals, encouraging us to take these mortal remains God declares good seriously as we also accompany them to dirt or fire, commending them into God’s trustworthy and eternal care; moreover, at worship through the Easter Triduum, that proclaims and ritually re-tells the truth of the embodied God, dying on a cross, then being raised into the glorified body yet bearing his (and our) wounds. As Long notes, “The wounds and scars of suffering are still visible, preserved, and remembered in the glorified body.... A Jesus who is raised only in our minds ... would have no right to ask us to put our bodies on the line. And the risen Christ beckons us still to follow him... toward God’s future, when Christ will be all-in-all and our own perishable bodies will put on the imperishable.”¹⁴ Some churches enact the narrative with foot washing, others queue up on Good Friday to kiss the wooden cross, and Orthodox Christians parade the Epitaphios (tomb of Christ) through the church. All these dramatic elements heighten the story through the grittiness and heft of physical “stuff.”

For sharing this sacred partnership of witnessing to resurrection faith and the rich friendships with clergy colleagues, I am exceedingly grateful. *They* are the real funeral directors. I have been enriched by masterful preaching, liturgy, ritual from low to high, and pastoral ministry—all enveloped by the Easter story, the proclamation that God, ever faithful to God’s promises, *always* promises life, or as Tom Long expresses eloquently, “That the risen Christ has broken in and broken through from another realm to bring life where there is only death.”¹⁵

Notes

1 Thomas Lynch & Thomas G. Long, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 59.

2 Allen D. Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 254.

3 Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1997), 81.

4 Edwin Searcy, *Funerals as Counter-Culture* (Essay, University Hill United Church of Canada, Vancouver, BC), 5.

5 Ibid.

6 *The Roman Missal* (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011), 622.

7 Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life, Daily Meditations* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 235.

8 Searcy, *Funerals*, 5.

9 William R. Klein, Pastor Emeritus, Second Presbyterian Church, Roanoke, Virginia, “*Till Christ Brings All Again*,” sermon preached 2012, Second Presbyterian Church, Roanoke, Virginia.

10 Lynch & Long, *The Good Funeral*, 211.

11 Scott Miller, *Reclaiming the Role of Lament in the Funeral Rite* (Call to Worship 38, no. 3, 2004-5), 34.

12 Ibid., 48.

13 Searcy, *Funerals*, 6.

14 Thomas G. Long, “Preaching the Gospel of Resurrection” in *Preaching Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard Lischer* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 84.

15 Ibid., 82.