

*Accompany Them
with Singing—
The Christian Funeral*

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PART ONE

Background

1

Marking Death: Human Rituals, Christian Practices

In the 1960s, an anthropologist exploring a cave in northern Iraq came across the graves of several Neanderthal men, tombs believed to be nearly 50,000 years old and among the oldest human burial sites ever found. Near the remains were discovered pollen grains from grape hyacinth, hollyhocks, and thistles, silent testimony that flowers had once been placed next to the bodies.¹ Thousands of miles away, at Sungir near Moscow, was found a cluster of Cro-Magnon graves, thirty millennia old, in which lie the remains of what appears to be a family. Draped around the bones of the man are necklaces strung with hundreds of painstakingly crafted ivory beads, and nearby are tools carved from mammoth bones. The woman's skull is placed on top of the man's grave, and next to the man and the woman are the remains of two children. They are buried head to head, and around them are scattered more than ten thousand beads of ivory, several rings and bracelets, a collection of spears and daggers, and the teeth of a fox.²

Who knows what happened to cause these deaths so many centuries ago, or what ceremonies accompanied these ancient burials? What we do know is that the flowers, the beads, the rings, and the other artifacts bear witness that from the earliest times human beings have cared tenderly for their dead and approached death with awe. Human death has never been simply a fact; it has always been a mysterious ocean summoning those left standing on the shore to stammer out convictions about life and to wonder what lies over the horizon. From the beginning,

humans have adorned burial places and the bodies of the dead with tokens of beauty and love, symbols that push back the brute facts and display the hunger for meaning in the shadow of death.

Some sociologists and anthropologists venture that the origins of religion can be found in these ancient death rituals. The ceremonies our early ancestors enacted reflexively in the face of death, they speculate, were the soil in which a sense of the holy grew. Others suggest that it was actually the other way around. An awareness of transcendence lies, they wager, hardwired in human consciousness, and the sense that there is something beyond the limits of life and the abyss of death compelled these earliest humans to adorn the graves of the dead with flowers and beads. Intimations of an unseen world were enacted in the rituals of burial.

Who can say? Which came first, the ritual rhythms of death or religious awe? Perhaps the knowledge that we cannot finally untangle the knot points to the fact that death and the sacred are inextricably entwined. In both, human beings stand on the edge of mystery and peer into depths beyond our knowing. What we do when the shadow of death falls across our life—the acts we perform and the ritual patterns we follow—etches in the dust of material life a portrait of our sense of the sacred. And, in like manner, what we finally believe and trust about the mystery at the heart of things shapes how our bodies move, what our hands do, where our feet take us, and what our mouths speak in the days of grief and loss. The dance of death moves to the music of the holy.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF FUNERALS

This book is about how one religious tradition, Christianity, with its own sense of the sacred, expresses itself in seasons of death. I want to explore how Christianity's particular understanding of life's holy mystery takes on shape and movement in the customs, practices, and rituals around death. My main interest here is not anthropological, however, but theological and pastoral. I want to explore Christian funerals—what they do, what they mean, how they work. The overarching goal of this book is quite practical. Specifically, it is to help priests and ministers who guide parishioners and congregations at the time of death to preside over funerals that genuinely embody the hope of the gospel. More broadly, this book is aimed at the larger church with the goal

that all Christians will move toward ever more faithful practices in the hour of death.

Doing so, however, will involve some hard work. We will need to be more than liturgical interior decorators, trying to figure out how to create tasteful funerals. We will need to step behind the curtain of our current customs to examine what lies hidden in the shadows and to explore the history of how we came to this place in our funeral practices. We will need to rethink basic assumptions about what makes for a “good funeral.”

The moment is ripe to explore the Christian funeral. Over the last half century, a number of exemplary funeral liturgies have been developed by the various Christian communions. Many of these have been stimulated by the breathtaking renewal of worship that has occurred among Roman Catholics as a part of the outpouring of reforms from the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, the appearance in 1969 of a new set of funeral rites for the Catholic world: *Ordo Exsequiarum*, the *Rite of Funerals*. These new rites reflected an attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to clear away centuries of clutter that had cropped up around funeral practices and to allow the strong bond between the death of a baptized Christian and the hope given in the resurrection of Jesus Christ to shine through more brightly.

Protestants have been prompted by this to do their own rethinking of the funeral, and in North America alone, revised funeral liturgies have been developed by Presbyterians, United Methodists, the United Church of Canada, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Church of Christ, Lutherans (twice), and several other denominations, all seeking to join Catholics in creating what Richard Rutherford has described as “truly a human and Christian symbolic language that allows death and the grief of loss their rightful articulation in a living faith community.”³

As compelling as these new funeral rites are, what is most impressive is how little impact they have had on actual practice. Ironically, right at the cultural moment that these rich resources for funerals have appeared, American Christians, along with the rest of American culture, have become increasingly confused and conflicted about healthy ways to commemorate death. Funeral practices are in a windstorm of change, and old customs are being abandoned right and left, but the new Christian funeral liturgies don't seem to factor much into the equation. What one scholar said about Catholics a decade after the new rite appeared could well apply to Protestants also:

After ten years of official use of the new Rite of Funerals . . . , American Catholics do not seem to be handling death any better than they did before. In fact, since much of the piety and devotion connected with prayer for the dead has fallen into disuse in that same period, there might be a tendency, at least in some parts of the country, to cope with death more poorly than before the reform.⁴

If we ever needed evidence that writing good liturgy does not automatically generate good worship, the current state of the Christian funeral would be a prime case. While liturgical specialists quietly toiled away, crafting funeral services of great beauty and depth, actual Christian funerals were often migrating toward vague “celebrations of life,” sometimes with such features as open-mike speeches by friends and relatives, multimedia presentations of the life of the deceased, NASCAR logos on caskets, the deceased’s favorite pop music played from CDs, the release of butterflies, cremated remains swirled into plastic sculpture, and cyber-cemeteries.

Even when the changes are less dramatic, it is still true that a general cultural and generational shift toward experimentation, customization, and personalization has impacted the social network of death customs and the Christian funeral along with it. “Leave it to my generation, the baby boomers, to take control,” writes Michelle Cromer. She continues:

We’re not only organizing our parents’ funerals, but even planning our own in advance, putting our requests in writing and letting everyone know exactly what we want. We’re a demographic so totally accustomed to center stage that we will never give it up without some fanfare. I first noticed this in [the movie] homage to my generation, *The Big Chill*. After the priest announces that a college friend will play one of the deceased’s favorite songs, Karen [one of the characters] solemnly sits down at the church organ and hits the classic opening chords of the Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” As that sixties anthem accompanied the funeral procession, I wasn’t the only boomer in the audience who thought, *Now that’s the way to go out.*⁵

Responding to the demand for funerals with fanfare, one funeral home in Florida has taken to designing elaborate stage sets for theme-based funerals, and a New Jersey funeral director proclaimed that the old-fashioned funeral business is itself on life support. “We can no lon-

ger deliver funerals out of a cookie cutter,” he said, speaking of funeral professionals. “We must become event planners.”⁶

Funeral changes are not just cultural trends and fashion statements. If our theology shapes our funeral practices, and vice versa, then a change in our practice signals a commensurate shift in our theology. Our funerals are indeed changing, and that means something about how we view death theologically is changing as well. At first glance, though, it is hard to assess what is happening. Are we renewing our faith in a different day, or losing our grip? Many funerals today are more upbeat, more filled with laughter, more festive. Is this good or not? Funerals tend to be less formal, less governed by ritual, more relaxed and personal. A gain or a loss? There seems to be less emphasis on the presence of the dead body in funerals, an increase in “memorial services,” a measurable rise in the number of people choosing cremation. Worthy, or a cause for concern?

Time magazine correspondent Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, who spent several years studying changing death rituals in America in order to write a book on the topic, concluded that the “new American way of death is personal, spiritual, and emotional. It is altruistic, futuristic, and individualistic.” When she began her exploration, she was, by her own description, “an unabashed advocate of the new American way of death, a way I believed involved celebration in place of mourning.”⁷ But near the end of her research, two beloved members of her family—her grandfather and a cousin—died, and her mother’s cancer, once in remission, returned “with blinding speed and terrible fury.” These sudden and sobering encounters with mortality prompted Cullen to question her “blithe convictions” about mourning being displaced by celebration. “If [my mother] died,” she wrote, “if I lost this woman who raised me, would I have it in me to throw a party?”⁸

The stakes are high here. I am persuaded that in this, our moment in history, we are going through one of those periodic upheavals in the ways we care (or don’t) for the dead that are inevitable signs of an upheaval in the ways we care (or don’t) for the living. To put it bluntly, a society that has forgotten how to honor the bodies of those who have departed is more inclined to neglect, even torture, the bodies of those still living. A society that has no firm hope for where the dead are going is also unsure how to take the hands of its children and lead them toward a hopeful future.

I also am convinced that there is a broad but identifiable Christianly way to honor the dead, to walk with them in hope, and to mark well the

meaning of death and life. Christianity is not simply a set of ideas and doctrines; it is a way of life, and it finally expresses itself, or denies itself, in the patterns of everyday living, in the ways that Christians do such things as raise children, care for the earth, gather at table, show hospitality to the stranger, manage money, and face death. There are Christianly patterns of living, and there are Christianly patterns of dying and caring for the dead. In sum, I believe, amid the swirling changes and uncertainties of American death patterns, it not only makes sense but is in fact an urgent task to describe, nurture, and practice what can be called “the Christian funeral.”

NECESSITY, CUSTOM, AND CONVICTION

The fabric of the Christian funeral is not woven entirely from threads of pure spiritual silk. The finger of God did not inscribe a divinely mandated funeral service on Moses’ tablets, Jesus gave no teaching about funerals in the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul did not bother the Corinthians with burial instructions. Throughout their history, Christians have always done what every other social group has done: figure things out for themselves and construct death practices out of rock from nearby quarries. When someone dies, Christians, like all other humans, look around at the immediate environment and ask: What do we have to do? What seems fitting to do? What do we believe we are summoned to do? In other words, Christian funeral practices emerge at the intersection of *necessity*, *custom*, and *conviction*.

Necessity

Necessity refers to the fact that a death creates certain social needs and obligations that cannot be avoided. Scholars argue about the existence of human universals, but the debate mostly grows silent when death knocks at the door. It is a universal truth that every human being eventually dies, and all societies have recognized that the physical fact of death cannot be ignored. When someone who was alive a moment ago stops breathing forever, we don’t need a law or a creed to tell us that something must be done. It is coded deep in our DNA that a dead body in the presence of the living both poses some kind of threat—of contamination? of impurity? of the loss of human

dignity?—and constitutes a summons to dispose of the body with care and reverence.

In this regard, death is like birth. As funeral director Thomas Lynch has noted, “At one end of life the community declares *It’s alive, it stinks, we’d better do something*. At the other end we echo, *It’s dead, it stinks, we’d better do something*.”⁹ A generation ago, when a group in the Church of England made a list of the key tasks of a Christian funeral, at the top of the list was: “To secure the reverent disposal of the corpse.”¹⁰ They threw the word “reverent” in to make it sound like theology, but it was mainly just an acknowledgment of human necessity.

So some of what Christians do at the time of death is dictated not by a creed but by the simple truth that a dead body must be moved fairly quickly from “right here” to somewhere “over there.” In this regard, Christians are no different from anyone else. When Christians care for, memorialize, and dispose of our dead, we are not doing something only Christian believers do. We are doing something all human beings do, acting on a very human need, carrying out a basic human responsibility.

And that, interestingly enough, *is* a matter of theology. The necessity of tending to dead bodies belongs, as theologians would remind us, to the order of creation. And that means that whatever rituals Christians develop around death, they are faithful only to the extent that they do not obscure the essential humanity of the experience. A Christian funeral should not be a precious ceremony aimed at covering up the fact that someone is really dead and that the people who are around the dead person have to take care of the body. That is the honest-to-God truth of what is going on. When we care for the bodies of the dead, we are not trying to hide an embarrassment behind a screen of piety; we are trying to do a human thing humanely. Jesus does not reveal what it means to be “fully Christian,” but rather what it means to be fully human. Part of being human is confessing that we are *humus*. “I would say,” writes Robert Pogue Harrison, “that humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories. . . . To be human means above all to bury.”¹¹

Custom

If simple necessity demands that something be done with the bodies of the dead, local customs dictate, to some degree, what is imaginable

and proper to do. Our place in the world—geographically, historically, culturally—both sets limits and offers possibilities for what actions are expected, for what seems fitting to do and not to do at the time of death. I am thinking here less about broad multicultural themes and general ethnic and class styles of ritual observance (although these are certainly not irrelevant) and more about the set of very particular and concrete actions that are built into the repertoire of a community's response to death.

For example, when someone dies in my own family, we call a funeral home to come for the body. We don't think much about other options; this is just what we do. The body is removed, cared for by the funeral professionals, and we are not likely to encounter the body of our loved one again until the time of the funeral. In other families and social groups, however, such behavior would be astonishing, even offensive, since their impulse is to stay with the dead body at all times and never leave the body alone or in the hands of "strangers." If someone from one of these groups were to challenge my family on our behavior and demand to know how we could possibly allow the body of a loved one out of our sight, I imagine that most of us would end up looking puzzled and stammering, "I don't know. That's just the way it's done."

In some Japanese American Christian funerals, there is a ceremony that harkens back to customs older than Christianity among the Japanese: a floral tribute. Near the end of a funeral service, the congregation processes forward with flowers, which are placed on or in the coffin.¹² As the people pass by, they show respect for the deceased by bowing toward the body, praying while standing next to the body, or by passing by in silence.¹³ Once again, an action that would be puzzling or even suspect to some, bowing toward a dead body, seems to others intuitively the way to show respect. It's just the way it's done.

There are many other examples. In many Alabama farm communities, the burial of the dead in the nearby earth within a matter of days after death seems only natural, perhaps the only proper thing to do. But for people in the far north country, where the ground is frozen hard for several months each year; or in New Orleans, where the water table lies just below the surface; or perhaps in Manhattan, where the space for cemeteries has long been exhausted and earth burial has been prohibited for over a century, very different local customs for the disposition of the body arise. Or again, Puritan settlers in Massachusetts would have found the merest discussion of the life of deceased at burial

to be effusive, excessive, and scandalous, whereas in most settings in our day, with our very different understanding of self and personhood, refusal to talk at all about the dead person would seem cold and impersonal indeed. Yet again, in the low country of South Carolina, some African Americans still follow the old African custom of lifting infants and young children in the air and passing them over the coffins of their deceased relatives. It keeps the children from “fretting” they say, and being afraid of the dead.¹⁴ It’s just the way it’s done.

David Sudnow studied the unwritten local customs and social protocols prevailing in an urban hospital about how word of a death spreads, about who may and who may not break the news that someone has died. Two centuries ago, the news of a death would be announced to the whole community by the tolling of the church bell, but now it seems to many in our culture more fitting to spread the news of a death more quietly and privately. Sudnow found that in the hospital (symbolic of urban society as a whole) it is considered proper that news about the death of a close loved one should be delivered only by someone who had a significant relationship to the deceased and who is of high symbolic standing—for example, a physician, a head nurse, a priest or minister, a close friend, or another relative. It would be a serious social infraction if a woman, stepping off a hospital elevator on the way to visit her husband, unaware that he has just suffered a fatal cardiac arrest, should be told of his death by the man restocking the vending machine.

So deeply ingrained is this sense of protocol that some hospitals have policies stating that only the attending physician can report a death. Hospital staff are compelled, therefore, to develop elaborate techniques to avoid breaking the news prematurely while at the same time not lying to the families by implying that their loved one is still alive.¹⁵

The welter of local death customs in any given social context often presents a challenge to Christian pastors. On the one hand, funerals are not universal templates that somehow elbow all local customs and protocols out of the way. They are inevitably set down and performed in particular social contexts and among folk with a ground sense of what is proper and what is not. If an Episcopal priest opens the *Book of Common Prayer* and begins to read the funeral service in a community where restrained emotion is the customary way to show reverence, then the service will proceed in stillness. If, however, the same priest begins reading the very same service in a community where loud crying and visible displays of grief are the locally expected way to show respect to

the deceased, then the priest better be ready to have the service periodically interrupted.

On the other hand, some local death customs seem not compatible with the gospel. For example, the Ma'anyan people of southern Borneo have a custom of holding a death festival every few years at which all of the bodies that have been buried since the last festival are dug up and then cremated. The reason for this is the Ma'anyan belief that the souls of the dead linger for a while in the dead body before they depart.¹⁶ This custom of disinterment rests on a narrative about souls and bodies quite different from the gospel affirmation of embodied human beings. Consequently, it would be difficult to imagine incorporating this practice into a Christian funeral liturgy.

The early Christian movement, almost from the very beginning of its life, had to sift the wheat from the chaff in terms of local custom. In the earliest days, when the decision was made to open Christianity to Gentiles, this was, notes liturgical scholar Anscar J. Chupungco, much more complicated and controversial than merely welcoming some new people into the club. Instead, says Chupungco, "it was a question of investing the Christian rites of worship with elements from the culture and traditions of the gentiles."¹⁷ The church realized that if worship was going to be able to communicate the faith to them, it would need to incorporate symbols, ceremonies, and words that were familiar to Gentiles. Chupungco uses a nice phrase to describe this. Worship, he says, had to become "*recognizably incarnate*, that is, as having taken flesh in the cultural milieu of the worshippers."¹⁸

This does not mean, Chupungco hastens to say, that the church promiscuously welcomed into Christian worship every local custom and ceremony it encountered. In fact, he says, the early church kept its wits about it and was quite careful to avoid "eclecticism," which Chupungco defines as "a random, indiscriminate, and undigested borrowing of alien doctrines and practices regardless of whether or not they accord with the faith received from the Apostles." The early church, he says, despised eclecticism, and it looked at Gentile culture, that is to say at pagan culture, with an appreciative but ever critical eye.

This allowed the early Christian movement, Chupungco argues, to take three basic postures toward local Gentile rituals and customs: it silently ignored what it found unworthy, it denounced what it found dangerous to the faith, and it welcomed what it could reinterpret in the light of the gospel. Thus the church quietly avoided the "unworthy" practice of animal sacrifice in mystery religions, thundered against the

“dangerous” and pompous initiation ceremonies of the Roman elite, and altered its baptismal rite to include a “reinterpreted” Gentile custom of drinking of a cup of milk mixed with honey (the Romans gave milk and honey to newborns to ward off sickness and evil spirits). The reason the church welcomed the milk-and-honey custom into worship was, says Chupungco, because it could and did reimagine it as the “fulfillment of God’s promise to our ancestors that he would lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey.”¹⁹ That wasn’t what milk and honey originally meant to the Romans, but it was what Christian liturgy was able to make of it.

So how does this apply to Christian funerals? The Christian faith is firmly, sometimes maddeningly, both countercultural and proindigenization at the same time. That is to say, the Christian faith transcends every tribe, clan, and local custom, while at the same time it seeks to express itself in every local dialect. Funerals should be “recognizably incarnate” in that the funeral combines that which transcends this place with that which embodies this place.

Here’s a test case: In some areas of the United States, it is a custom to drape the coffin of a military veteran with a U.S. flag. People who follow this custom could probably advance many reasons why—it shows “respect,” it’s a symbol of sacrifice, it’s a matter of honor, and so on—but mainly it is one of those local customs that for many folk simply seems fitting. The action is deeper than thought or strategy. This doesn’t mean it is right or wrong. “It’s just the way things are done around here.”

Most composers of sound Christian funeral liturgies, however, from their vantage point necessarily at some remove, are not impressed. They cannot imagine that a coffin bearing a national flag would be a proper symbol in a Christian funeral. It would be like carrying a banner in front of the coffin with a picture of a Republican elephant or a Democratic donkey. A funeral should be an occasion to announce that the deceased is a citizen of heaven, a child of the God of all nations and peoples, not a partisan. So, as the authors of one wise and prominent guide for Christian pastors say: “Regardless of whether a pall is used, other decorations, including floral arrangements, flags, and other insignia that distinguish the deceased and suggest that salvation depends on something other than Christ, are removed from the coffin prior to the service.”²⁰

But is this good advice? I would say it depends. As H. Richard Niebuhr reminded us, for a Christian the ethical question, What should

I do? is always preceded by another question: What is going on?²¹ If what is going on, in fact, is that the American flag is draped over, let us say, Fred's coffin as a sign that "salvation depends on something else than Christ," then stars and bars be gone. Interpreted this way, prominently parading a national symbol down the aisle should in no way be permitted in a Christian funeral. As the early church did when facing such practices, we should either omit the custom (which is what the liturgists suggest) or denounce it (preferably not at the funeral!). Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre would probably urge the latter, since he finds the blending of symbols of the sacred, the nation, and death to be a particularly noxious combination. He writes:

The modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf. As I have remarked elsewhere, it is like being asked to die for the telephone company.²²

But what if something else is going on here? In most cases, I suspect that the flag on Fred's coffin is not anything close to a rejection of salvation in Christ alone or triumphant nationalism on the part of anyone. In fact, coffins have a hard time, I would think, symbolizing much more than the dead persons inside them. The flag on Fred's coffin likely stands for something about Fred, something fairly difficult to name, something perhaps like Fred was a "good" man, a good citizen, a man who answered without hesitation when duty called, or perhaps even that there was a moment in Fred's life when he gave himself to something outside of his small space in society. What would stripping off the flag at the entrance to the church actually mean then to the people who are present? "*Solus Christus!*" or simply a diminishment of Fred?

So what do we do about the flag on Fred's coffin? Do we remove it at the beginning of the funeral? Do we attempt to reinterpret it by putting a Christian pall over the flag, by placing a cross on the coffin, or by saying somewhere in the service, "Fred was an Army veteran and served bravely in Vietnam, but what is even more important to know about him is that he belongs to Jesus Christ and the great company of the saints"? Or do we just let it go? Deciding wisely will require a pastor's eye and a pastor's good judgment, which has always been the case in Christian worship. The church's first liturgists, observes Chupungco,

were pastors and catechists who had a keen perception of how their people lived their lives in the cultural milieu of the time. They were profoundly cognizant of their people's rituals, needs, and aspirations. These they introduced into the liturgy, so that people could worship with their feet on the ground, so that the liturgy would not be divorced from the reality of human life. They were great liturgists because they were pastors.²³

Conviction

Combing through the pages of church history, we soon become aware that there is not now, and there never has been, any single, ideal pattern for Christian funerals. Christians have developed many ways to baptize, to marry, to pray, and to feast, and the same is true of marking death. Christians have stood beside graves in silent and prayerful reverence, and they have shouted defiantly at death with loud songs of victory. They have marched to the cemetery in solemn cadences, and they have danced to graveyards with the joyful rhythms of jazz bands. Christians have buried their dead, and they have cremated them. They have kept coffins open during the funeral, and they have insisted they be closed. They have wrapped their dead in simple shrouds, and they have adorned them with royal vestments. Christians have prayed lavish funeral liturgies, and they have stood at the grave with only a few words wrought from the heart.

The variety of Christian funeral practices stems partly from historical, ethnic, cultural, and denominational differences, but there is also no one pure form of Christian funeral because there is no one pure form of Christian. Christians do not live or die in the abstract. They are real people who live real lives, and they die real and very different deaths. They die young, and they die old and full of days. They die in the flames of brave martyrdom, and they die cowering in fear. They die as saintly sinners; they die as sinful saints. They die of crib death, of cancer, of old age, and by their own hand. They die full of joy, and they die despairing. They die in Hartford and Buenos Aires, Karachi and Toronto, Nairobi and rural Nebraska—in the places where they have lived and loved and in places where they are strangers and exiles. They die in hospitals and nursing homes, along highways, at sea, and at work. They die surrounded by those who love them, and they die alone.

No ideal, crystalline form of the Christian funeral shimmers above these personalities, places, and circumstances. And yet, amid all of this

diversity, there is nevertheless a unifying force in the practice of Christian funerals: the gospel narrative. All Christian funerals—formal or informal, high church or low, small or large, urban or rural—say, in essence, “Look! Can you perceive this? The life and death of this one who has died can be seen, if you know how to look, as shaped after the pattern of the life and death of Jesus.” Through the telling of the sacred story, we have seen Jesus be baptized, we have seen him walk his life’s pathway in obedience, and we have seen him die and be buried. We have encountered him in the glory of his resurrection, and we have watched with the disciples as he departed from us and ascended into heaven. This is the story the New Testament tells about Jesus, and this is the story the funeral tells about the Christian who has died.

In a Christian funeral, the community of faith is invited once more, and in dramatic fashion, to recognize that the Christian life is shaped in the pattern of Christ’s own life and death. We have been, as Paul says in Romans, baptized into Jesus’ death and baptized into Jesus’ life:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

(Rom. 6:3–5)

This is what gives unity to the fragments and particularities of a Christian funeral. At death, we are, like all human beings, under the necessity of moving the dead body from “here” to “there,” but it is the gospel story that tells us the truth about where “here” and “there” are in the Christian life, that names the “here” as the life we have shared in faith and the “there” as the place in the arms of God toward which our sister or brother is moving. Only because Jesus has traveled this path toward God before us are we able to travel it ourselves, but because “of the new and living way that he opened for us” (Heb. 10:20) we do put one foot in front of the other on this journey. Here, then, is the conviction of faith that draws together all the necessity and custom of death into a funeral that bears witness to the gospel: a baptized saint, a child of God, one who has been traveling the path of faith, is now “traveling on.” This brother or sister, precious in the sight of God, is moving along the last mile of the way, and we, his or her companions in Christ, are traveling alongside to the place of farewell. As we travel, we sing and

we pray, we tell once again the gospel story, we say farewell, and in faith we return this our friend to God with thanksgiving.

Christian rituals of death have varied from age to age and from culture to culture, but in all times and places they have expressed this conviction that a saint is “traveling on.” Some Christians—but not all—dress the deceased in a white baptismal robe for the journey. Some Christians—but not all—stay awake with the body in the hours before the funeral, telling stories and sharing memories, not so much to guard the body or to shoo away the forces of evil, but as fellow pilgrims on the path, as a symbol of the communion of the saints and the unbroken connection with the saint who is “passing on,” not just passed away. Some Christians—but not all—open the coffin and look at the face of the deceased, perhaps several times in the course of the funeral and burial, not because they are morbidly curious about death, but because they are saying farewell to a sister or brother. Some Christians—but not all—carry the coffin into the sanctuary, pausing at stations to recount the liturgy of baptism. Some Christians—but not all—walk or march or ride in procession to the place of burial, giving shape to the conviction that the deceased is journeying to the other shore, to the “land that is brighter than day.” Some Christians—but not all—sing “From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host” and others sing “When we meet on that beautiful shore” and still others sing “O when the saints go marchin’ in,” but all Christians, in their own ways, mark the milestones of the saintly journey and the progress of a pilgrim toward “a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.”

In his memoir *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church*, Richard Lischer tells about his early years as a Lutheran pastor in the farm community of Cana, Illinois. “In Cana we baptized our babies, celebrated marriages, wept over the dead, and received Holy Communion, all by the light of our best window.”²⁴ What Lischer calls “our best window” was a stained-glass depiction of no less than the doctrine of the Trinity, set high into the east wall of the sanctuary above the altar. Though it was a piece of “ecclesiastical boilerplate,” as Lischer describes it, from a studio in Chicago, it was nonetheless impressive both for its rich colors and its sturdy insistence on classical theology. A large central triangle labeled “DEUS” was surrounded by three smaller triangles, marked respectively “PATER,” “FILIIUS,” and “SPIRITUS SANCTUS.” Each smaller triangle was connected to the larger DEUS triangle by a line labeled “EST” (is), and each smaller

triangle was connected to the other small triangles by lines marked “NON EST” (is not). In sum, the window announced the very nature of the Trinity: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and so on. “Our window’s geometric design,” observes Lischer, “seemed to say, ‘Any questions?’”

Thinking about the relationships between this window, his ministry, and the life of his congregation, Lischer observes,

We believed that there was a correspondence between the God who was diagramed in that window and our stories of friendship and neighborliness. If we could have fully taken into our community the name Trinity, we would have needed no further revelations and no more religion, for the life of God would have become our life.

The window, in other words, was no mere theological abstraction, but a map of the Christian life. Lischer goes on to say,

An aerial photographer once remarked that from the air you can see paths, like the canals on Mars, that crisscross pastures and fields among the farms where neighbors have trudged for generations, just to visit or help one another in times of need. These, too, are the highways among *Pater*, *Filius*, and *Spiritus Sanctus* grooved into human relationships. The word “religion” comes from the same root as “ligaments.” These are the ties that bind.²⁵

The Christian funeral is, in a way, like that great window in that little church in Illinois. It brings to the chaos and fragmentation of death the light of the one narrative that can hold things together, that can disclose what “is” and “is not” true, even as we face the cold glare of the last enemy, that can reveal amid the severed cords of loss the strong ligaments that bind the story of Jesus to the story of our lives.

Annie Dillard once compared worship to a play we “have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years,” she says, “we have not worked out the kinks.”²⁶ True, but we don’t rehearse this play hoping to work out the kinks—that will never happen, not in this life anyway. 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 so well that we know it by heart.

Nearly every weekday afternoon, I drive myself from my office at the university to my home several miles away. I have done this countless times, and I know the way by heart. Some afternoons my mind is so preoccupied by the events of the day that I find myself almost home, yet I cannot remember having made the trip, not in detail anyway. I think I have been an alert driver, braking and accelerating at all the right times and paying attention to the traffic around me, but I have traveled over several miles of road and made several turns along the way, and I cannot recall any of it. Whatever else this may say about me, it means this: my body knows the way home.

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.