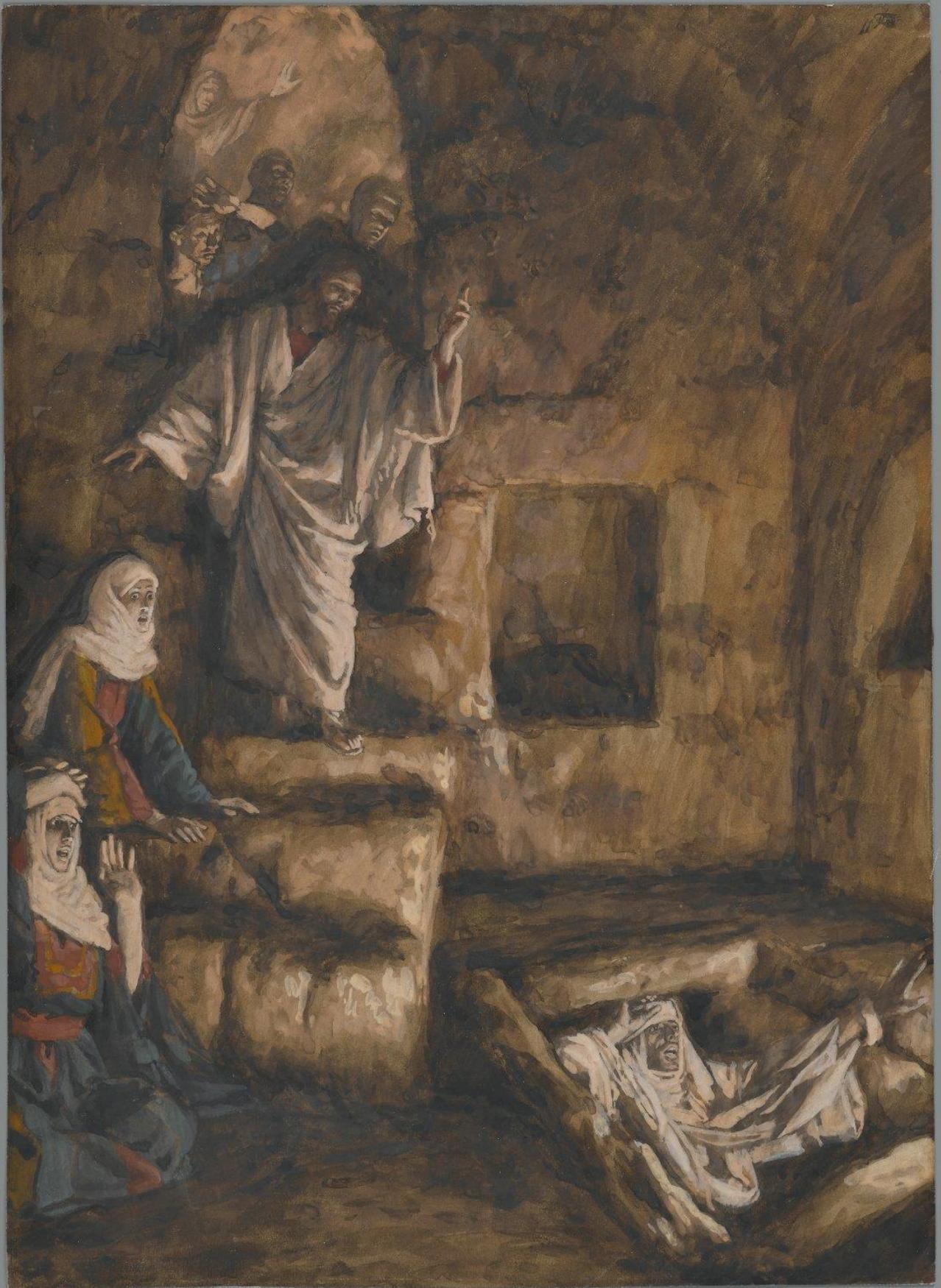


When someone close has died:
Preparing for hope and worship



Cover: "The Resurrection of Lazarus," by James Tissot (Public Domain)

By Pastor David Niemela

May God grant you His peace during this time. You may have heard that it is time to celebrate at the death of a Christian, but this isn't the whole truth. There is hope, but it is also fitting to grieve at the passing of a loved one, as Jesus himself wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), even though He was about to raise him back to life. Jesus guarantees his victory over death with His downpayment of the resurrection, but death today is still "the last enemy" yet to be destroyed by Him (1 Corinthians 15:26). So it is fitting to grieve today. Yet, Christian grieving is different from the grieving of those without Christ. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 describes the difference:

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. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.
(ESV)

This passage brings up the first thing to remember about a Christian funeral: Not that we have hope instead of grief, but we have hope *while* we grieve. It is only by faith in Jesus who "died and rose again." He will come back for his family, which is why it says, "brothers." Those trusting in Jesus only "fall asleep," which doesn't mean they haven't died, but it means that, just as you slept last night and rose out of bed, so a Christian will be laid to rest in the grave only to rise later at His return.

When Jesus rose again from his grave, you can imagine his companions were comforted with great hope. But that morning, while still in the process of learning He had risen, something else happened to the women who were the first to see the empty tomb, as described in Matthew 28:8-9:

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.

They worshipped Jesus, who is worthy of worship, being God in-the-flesh, and having conquered death. Worship is the second thing to remember.

A Christian funeral is a Christ-centered funeral. It will (1) deliver hope and (2) cause worship of God. Both happen through the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This includes the music, which will be discussed later.

These are some common mistakes we can avoid concerning worship:

- 1) At a Christian funeral, the deceased is *not* the center of the service. It is Jesus. The deceased lives on only because of Christ. So stories about the deceased can be helpful, if they illustrate God's Word or give examples of a life filled with faith in Jesus.
- 2) The deceased's wishes do not control the funeral. If there are any songs, stories, etc. suggested by the deceased that distract from worshipping God, they will not help, but rather will hinder, the purpose of a Christian funeral.

Here are other mistakes we will avoid concerning hope:

- 1) Again, the deceased's wishes do not control the funeral. While it can surely be helpful to have suggestions, we must examine what is suggested to see if it will give true hope, or false hope, to the congregation. Only Christ gives true hope.
- 2) Our greatest hope is actually not that the deceased is in heaven. This certainly is a comfort, if they trusted in Christ, but the most important thing is that you, and others, hear about and trust in Jesus so you can be saved from sin and join Him in the resurrection at His return. Jesus, who rose from the dead to give hope, is Himself the greatest hope at the funeral.

Building off of that last point: the best way to know if the deceased is in heaven is if you know how to get there yourself. Now is the best time to discuss this. Eternal matters are of utmost importance.

As a pastor, this is my greatest concern not only for you, but for the congregation I am pastoring at the service: to deliver hope through the Gospel of Jesus, so that people can be reunited to God through Jesus and worship Him. In this manner, although it sounds like an oxymoron, we will have the best funeral possible. Only because of Jesus, who brings life from

death, could we say such a thing. Surely it is a reason to worship Him, even in the darkest of times.

Information to fill out for church records:

Full Name: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Date of Death: _____

Place of Death: _____

Date of Burial: _____

Place of Burial: _____

Suggested Scriptures:

Pastor will include some or all of the following:

- Psalm 130 Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord, More than the watchmen for the morning; Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities
- Psalm 90:2-6, 12 Before the mountains were born, Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man back into dust, And say, "Return, O children of men". For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night. You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew. In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew; Toward evening it fades and withers away; So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom
- Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned
- Hebrews 9:27 And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment
- Luke 12:35-37, 40 Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect
- John 11:25-26 "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"
- 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will 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 will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come

about 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

- John 14:1-6 “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me”
- Revelation 21:1-7 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” Then He said to me, “It is done I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.”

A sampling of verses you can choose from:

- **Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

- **Psalm 31**

In you, O Lord, do I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame;

in your righteousness deliver me!

Incline your ear to me;

rescue me speedily!

Be a rock of refuge for me,

a strong fortress to save me!

For you are my rock and my fortress;

and for your name's sake you lead

me and guide me;

you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,

for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;

you have redeemed me,

O Lord, faithful God.

I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,

but I trust in the Lord.

I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,

because you have seen my affliction;

you have known the distress of my soul,

and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;

you have set my feet in a broad place.

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;

my eye is wasted from grief;

my soul and my body also.

For my life is spent with sorrow,

and my years with sighing;

my strength fails because of my iniquity,

and my bones waste away.

Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,

especially to my neighbors,

and an object of dread to my acquaintances;

those who see me in the street flee from me.

I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my
enemies and from my persecutors!
Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!
O Lord, let me not be put to shame,
for I call upon you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go silently to Sheol.
Let the lying lips be mute,
which speak insolently against the
righteous
in pride and contempt.
Oh, how abundant is your goodness,
which you have stored up for those
who fear you
and worked for those who take refuge
in you,
in the sight of the children of
mankind!
In the cover of your presence you hide
them
from the plots of men;
you store them in your shelter
from the strife of tongues.
Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown his

steadfast love to me
when I was in a besieged city.
I had said in my alarm,
“I am cut off from your sight.”
But you heard the voice of my pleas
for mercy
when I cried to you for help.
Love the Lord, all you his saints!
The Lord preserves the faithful
but abundantly repays the one who
acts in pride.
Be strong, and let your heart take
courage,
all you who wait for the Lord!

• **Psalm 42**

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before
God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the
house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within
me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my salvation and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;

therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,

from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep

at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,

and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock:

“Why have you forgotten me?

Why do I go mourning

because of the oppression of the enemy?”

As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me,

while they say to me all the day long,

“Where is your God?”

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my salvation and my God.

• **Psalm 121**

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;

the Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The Lord will keep

your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

- **John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** (see above)
- **Matthew 11:28-30.** Jesus said Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
- **Romans 8:38-39** For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us

from the love of God in Christ Jesus
our Lord.

- **Job 19:25-27**

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon
the earth.

And after my skin has been thus
destroyed,

yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and
not another.

My heart faints within me!

- **Others in the Scriptures you may
have**

Music

Music that is chosen should line up with the Scriptures and help us focus on Jesus. All music that mentions “God,” “Jesus,” “heaven,” “hope,” or other words associated with Christianity doesn’t necessarily worship God or deliver the hope that you and the congregation needs to hear at the services. In fact, these songs could be taking God’s Name in vain. They attach false teaching to God’s Name. There is no doubt some will come to the service who do not know Jesus by faith. These songs must not confuse the congregation or be vague. The congregation needs to clearly hear the truth of Jesus’ good news.

To find music that clearly proclaims worship and hope in Jesus Christ you do not only need to look in our hymnal, but there are many comforting hymns and also worshipful hymns of the risen Jesus Christ found there. You may have other favorite hymns besides this following list, but this list is provided for ideas:

- 545 Because He Lives
- 561 When Peace Like a River
- 564 God Will Take Care of You
- 568 Day by Day
- 601 Abide with Me; Fast Falls the Eventide
- 602 Nearer, My God, to Thee
- 611 Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord
- 625 He the Pearly Gates Will Open

It is fitting to have the congregation sing at some point(s) during the service so that they can actively share in the worship of God and proclaiming the hope we have in Jesus beyond death.

There are also copyright concerns, especially with newer music, we must be aware of. This usually concerns lyrics displayed for the congregation to sing and background tracks to which vocalists sing. In view of the commandment, “You shall not steal,” we respect the music artists who worked hard to make worshipful and hopeful music. Specifics will be discussed as you suggest music.

Suggested pianist: _____

Funeral Planning:

Food:

(It is recommended to have meal before burial)

Sound Tech:

Pianist:

Sample Order of Service:

[Prelude:]

Hymn:

Opening Prayer and Scripture: Pastor David Niemela

Scripture Readings:

Obituary:

Announcements:

Message- (Suggested text?)

Special Music:

Prayer and Benediction: Pastor David

Hymn:

[Postlude:]

Other gatherings

- Date of visitation:
 - Will there be a family service at the visitation? If so, what time?
- Graveside service the day of funeral?
 - If no, what date?

Objects to present at visitation and/or funeral:

Pictures, military honors, hobbies, accomplishments...

What to expect the day of:

- "Goodbye" before the closing of the casket before the service
- Scripture and prayer with the family 5 min before
- Process into sanctuary during first hymn after the congregation, recess out during last hymn before the congregation