Practicing Resurrection:
Grief and the Christian Funeral

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“How could God do this to us?” She slams the coffee mug down on the picnic table. This is the question she has been asking over and over again—and not just this morning. She can’t ask this question of her children, because she’s supposed to be “faithful.” She won’t ask this question of her pastor, because she doesn’t see him any more. Church is what she used to do on Sunday mornings. She’s sick of people talking to her and telling her that God will bring some good of her suffering. She needs to talk back.

We’re speaking out.

“What did we do to deserve all this?” The coffee mug slams down again. We both lost our husbands to the same rare and always fatal form of brain cancer. For a year we shared doctors and treatments, clinical trials and alternative therapies. Her husband, diagnosed earlier, lasted longer. He declined like a leaf falling in a gentle breeze. My husband sustained a fairly high quality of life—then just dropped off a cliff. Now we share coffee, a gallows sense of humor, and long walks.

We’re acting out.

“If God is all-powerful, why would God let cancer happen?” Mentally, I added to her list: Or Syria? Taksim Square? The murder rate in Oakland, where we sit on her deck in a crisp fall Saturday morning, watching coffee send plumes of steam into the air? Above us, the clouds look like brain scans, though I decide not to point this out.

The Christian funeral invites mourners from suffering into grief. Meaning is being restored as the shards of a life now ended come together into a new narrative: the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
That kind of sky used to scare me, until I imagined that maybe we were all living deep into the brain of God. Maybe, just maybe, God wanted so much to share the human condition that God even took on brain cancer. Maybe, just maybe, God is powerful enough to be stricken. I remember the faces of our dying husbands, swollen with steroids and burned by radiation.

We’re remembering.

“I mean, how could God do this to us?” She’s come full circle, back to her original question. As always, I have no answers, and it’s not answers she wants. She wants the Old Life back again. That Old Life is not coming back.

These questions circle anyone who’s suffered loss. The Christian funeral takes them seriously. As they gather in the presence of a God who knew suffering intimately, mourners turn from loss to grief. They craft suffering into a resurrection practice. In this article, I will explore the Christian funeral as a pilgrimage from loss into grief, one that invites mourners to speak out, to act out, and to remember. In so doing, they find themselves re-membered into New Life in the body of Christ. The Christian funeral invites mourners to “practice resurrection.”

**LOSS AND GRIEF: A DIFFERENCE**

In their classic work on pastoral care, Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson distinguish between loss and grief: loss is what happens to people; grief is what they do with it. People have no control over what happens to them; tragedy comes unbidden. They can only control how they respond. While suffering is passive (“cancer killed him”), grief claims active voice (“now he lives in Christ”). The Christian funeral choreographs a grieving process. My friend’s haunted questions above demonstrate the need.

“How could God do this to us?” The question fingers God as the author of all suffering, a charge hard to hold against a God who suffered in becoming human. Yet, if it falsely judges divine nature, the question reveals something true about human nature. Suffering robs people of their agency. Cancer turned my friend’s husband into an invalid; it turned her into a full-time caregiver. No wonder she reverted to passive voice and accusative case. A ravenous disease killed him and ruined her life as well. French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) captured the impact of suffering: “It deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things.”

Suffering makes people objects in a life that something or someone else controls.

By inviting people to return to “I” language, grieving points the way back to

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2“Grieving is the intentional work grief-stricken persons engage in, enabling them to return to full, satisfying lives.” Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, All Our Losses, All Our Griefs: Resources for Pastoral Care (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988) 19.

subjectivity. As an assertion of agency, grieving works in both personal and social settings. As he healed from a stroke, a man who’d once described his condition as “the stroke paralyzed me,” told his family: “I use a cane, when I get tired.” He wasn’t happy to have to resort to “the stick,” but the shift in language marked a transition from loss to grieving.

Grieving can also be a social, even political process. It registers suffering publicly and intentionally, so that it will never happen again. As part of its “Recovery of Historical Memory Project,” the Archdiocese of Guatemala published a four-volume report entitled *Nunca Mas/Never Again!*, chronicling atrocities villagers suffered during the civil war. This political expression of grieving cost Monsignor Juan José Gerardi Conedera (1922–1998) his life, but the report wrests the official account from the military. As people reclaim agency, they begin the journey from loss to grieving.4

In El Salvador, a social and political process of grieving took on boldly religious dimensions. The Jesuit chapel at the University of Central America in San Salvador features an extraordinary “Stations of the Cross” series. Instead of a traditional depiction of events from the life of Christ, the stations display the suffering of the Salvadoran people during their civil war. Their bodies, broken, bloodied, and mutilated, replace the broken, bloodied, and mutilated body of Christ. The stations stand both as a visual protest against the military’s violations and an assertion of the Salvadoran people’s subjectivity. The fourteen etchings reclaim agency, moving people from loss to grieving.5

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The Christian funeral offers similar protest: it invites mourners to move from suffering into grief. Painful as it can be, planning a funeral carves out a space for agency. In a situation where family and friends feel like spectators in a game dominated by an inexorable trajectory of dying, the funeral asks them to take charge. Before death, everything was handled by the juggernaut of disease, or the professions of the medical profession, or the dulled reflexes of a drunken driver, or the inexorable diminishment of Alzheimer’s. The ritual stands as a defiant attempt not to let the whole story be told by disease or cancer or alcohol or addiction but by a God who was in Christ “reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Beginning with planning for the funeral, the family of the children of God take charge.

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Choosing hymns, texts, and readers; crafting a sermon; considering a eulogy; writing prayers; even simply gathering the troops: mourners assert their real identity as disciples, not as victims of death and dying. Death is not the last word—resurrection is.

Often the dying participate in the planning of their own funerals, a realism not all can bear. The late Lutheran theologian Timothy F. Lull (1943–2003) started writing drafts for his funeral sometime in his late thirties, periodically updating the order of service. Having lost his father at a young age, Tim found the exercise a way of turning that early loss into a resurrection practice. When the time came to actually enact the liturgy he’d crafted, the service was “quintessential Tim,” right down to the Christmas hymn during communion. Tim was present at his own funeral; it was the best protest. Death was not the last word: resurrection had final say.

PRACTICING RESURRECTION: THE FUNERAL LITURGY

Whoever plans the funeral, the rite consoles those who mourn and affirms resurrection. From the planning to the actual burial, the ritual embraces all the impulses my friend displayed on her porch on that chilly fall morning: speaking up, acting out, and remembering.

There are, however, three important differences. First, the primary unit of belonging in Christian community is neither family of origin nor family of choice, but the family of the children of God. The funeral liturgy echoes elements of the Christian rite of initiation. Baptismal imagery abounds, for baptism sets the pattern of the Christian life. Those baptized into Christ were baptized into his life, death, and resurrection. Accordingly, the funeral liturgy begins with a “Thanksgiving for Baptism.” The white cloth placed over the coffin or urn recalls the white baptismal robes. Sprinkling holy water brings to mind the waters of baptism. The funeral liturgy takes place against the horizon of Christian baptism.

Second, the primary body of reference in a Christian funeral is not the body of the deceased, but the body of Christ. For this reason, some Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Others may deem the meal “exclusive” of non-Christians in attendance and therefore inappropriate. Sometimes the decision “to eat or not to eat” depends on local custom. Whatever the practice, Christ is present—and the Christian funeral need make no apologies for being “Christian.”

Finally, the Christian funeral emphatically does not return the Old Life back again but promises New Life entirely. While an end to “magical thinking” is not always welcome, the landscape of resurrection is not uncharted territory. Mourners may not have maps for the journey ahead, but they do have a compass: the life,

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6 Thanks to Rev. Patricia Lull for both the story and the permission to share it.
7 See the discussion of “to eat or not to eat” in Melinda A. Quivik’s A Christian Funeral: Witness to the Resurrection (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 77–79. While targeting Lutheran funeral practices, the book is brief, wise, and full of good counsel to all Christians.
8 See Joan Didion, The Year of Magical Thinking (New York: Knopf, 2006). Didion writes of her inability to get rid of her husband’s shoes: he might come back—and need them again.
death, and resurrection of Christ.\textsuperscript{9} As they travel, the community speaks up, acts out, and remembers, and in these ritual gestures, it is itself re-membered into the body of Christ.

We speak up

With praise for the God in whose name they gather and with thanksgiving for the baptism they have received, mourners lift their voices in prayer. The pattern of prayer is so familiar, it’s easy to overlook its power. Liturgical prayer of the sort featured in the funeral service follows a distinctive pattern: naming, praising, and interceding. A brief prayer of the day from the \textit{Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)} telegraphs these dimensions:

\begin{quote}
Almighty God, source of all mercy and giver of comfort, graciously tend those who mourn, that, casting all their sorrow on you, they may know the consolation of your love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

The prayer addresses God directly, and direct address is always a way of getting someone’s attention. Prayer calls God out; it operates out of a deep conviction that there is someone listening and ready to respond. Moreover, liturgical prayer directly addresses God in many and various ways, suggesting that a single name cannot quite contain this God. The funeral liturgy displays a variety of names for God: Holy God; Almighty God; Shepherd of Israel; Holy God, holy and powerful; Merciful God; God of peace, and so on. The range of names invites a range of responses: a multidimensional God means lots of different relational skills.

Praise delineates what this God has done, and description follows direct address. A prayer that directly addresses an “Almighty God” further describes this God as “source of all mercy and giver of comfort.” Faced with what God has done for them, mourners respond with praise.

Intercession follows on the heels of address and praise. Indeed, prayers are a good way to learn commands in another language, because they audaciously direct divine attention: “tend those who mourn.”\textsuperscript{11} The prayers call down divine comfort and consolation for the mourners; they beg safe passage for the deceased. They ask for what the gathered community needs.

In so doing, prayers invite mourners to enter the nominative case. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly tells disciples: “Ask, and it will be given you” (Matt 7:7, Luke 11:9). Asking forces one to take charge, in spite of and because of need: “I

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\textit{prayer calls God out; it operates out of a deep conviction that there is someone listening and ready to respond}
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\textsuperscript{10}"Funeral," \textit{Evangelical Lutheran Worship} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 281.

\textsuperscript{11}A character in Mary Doria Russell’s novel \textit{The Sparrow} (New York: Villard, 1996), Sofia Mendez, observes that lullabies are also a good way to learn the language of command: for example, “\textit{Hush, little baby; don’t you cry...}”
want you to help me.” “We hunger for daily bread... we need forgiveness... we want deliverance.” Surely, God knows the hungry need food, the sick need healing, and the mourners need comfort. Surely, God knows the dead need safe passage. But disciples need to ask. In the asking, they show themselves to be agents, even and especially in the face of loss.

We act out

At its core, the funeral liturgy gathers people together. This simple act of assembly stands as both gesture of defiance and witness to faith. Suffering isolates people one from another, and pain—physical, psychic, or spiritual—reduces the world to its source. My friend no longer darkened the doors of her church; she kept her questions from her children and from her pastors.

In part, my friend exiled herself. She returned to familiar surroundings a stranger, fluent in a language no one spoke. It enraged her, and that anger kept people away. They responded by exiling her in turn. They couldn’t stand her pain; they didn’t deserve her rage; they couldn’t bear her loss. She noticed their distance: “It’s not like brain cancer is contagious,” she protested. But she pointed out a common tendency. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), people cross the road when they stumble upon others’ misfortune. It might be catching; it might contaminate their own good luck. Whether exile is self-imposed or enforced by others, death scatters us.

The funeral liturgy counteracts the centrifugal force of loss. It gathers people to comfort those who mourn. Herbert Anderson explores the mystery of consolation directly, distinguishing between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy, he notes, begins with the word “I,” drawing attention to the one consoling, not the one mourning. Empathy, in contrast, makes space for the mourner’s words and silences. Empathy promises nothing more and nothing less than sturdy presence and a listening ear.

It is not “What shall I say?” but rather “How much can I hear?” that will make the difference. If empathy consoles, then listening is much more important than speaking. We need to be able to hear and feel where the “wounds hurt most” in order to transform the isolation of grievers into communities of the suffering ones.12

In its very act of assembly, the Christian funeral defies death’s isolation and creates community.

But the Christian funeral also functions as witness to faith. It creates a community that trespasses boundaries. Just as the scattered disciples gathered in locked rooms after Jesus’ death to receive the risen Christ (John 20:19), the funeral gathers people to celebrate with all the saints, present and past, living and dead. Medieval Gothic cathedrals made this witness architecturally. The high altar stood in the transept. In front of the high altar, the congregation gathered in the nave. Behind

the high altar, the ambulatory stretched in a semi-circle. In these chapels and under paving stones of the ambulatory were resting places for the dead: priests, bishops, local patrons, and oftentimes relics of the saints. Above the high altar and around the ambulatory, stained-glass windows depicted stories from Scripture and displayed images of the apostles and patron saints. In worship the priest would stand at the high altar with his back to the people. It was a gesture of clerical privilege, to be sure, but it was also a gesture of solidarity with the living. When Mass was celebrated, both priest and congregation joined the communion of saints in a joint act of praise. The curtain between worlds lifted.  

Etched in glass and sculpted in stone, the theology of a Gothic cathedral witnesses eloquently to the enduring presence of the communion of saints. The Christian funeral marks passage from congregation to communion of saints or, as a friend put it, from the community of the merely alive to the community of those who are really, really alive.

In contemporary worship settings, the litany of the saints echoes this theology. As the congregation recites the names of the saints, the saints themselves enter the assembly—or rather, the congregation becomes aware of a presence that has never departed. One powerful contemporary variation of this litany is the practice in Latin America, where so many people have died in the struggle for justice. The litany includes these contemporary martyrs in their prayers. As each is named, the congregation responds: “Presente!” “You are here with us. We have not forgotten. We continue the struggle in your name.” It’s powerful witness to the presence of communion of saints.

We remember

My friend wanted her Old Life back again. She accused it darkly of having forgotten her address. She told the neighbors, “If you see my Old Life out there, would you please remind it where I live?” Everything triggered a memory: a smell, a noise, the light coming through the fog. When she told stories, they all began, “Remember when we used to…. ” She assembled an album of snapshots from a life that was no more. Her children worried she was living in the past; her anger,
however, signaled that she knew the past was not coming back. These memories were the pieces of a new creation. It’s a familiar pattern.

The book of Genesis telegraphs God’s way of working in the world: new creation always comes from the broken pieces of something else. For the first creation to happen, that smooth stone of matter had to be shattered. Light had to be broken apart from darkness, day from night, sun from moon and all stars. The creation of humans only mirrors the carnage: Adam comes out of the earth; Eve, from the broken body of Adam. Always there is loss. Always there is breakage. These pieces are the stuff of new creation.

The Christian funeral affirms breakage as part of the act of creation. It constitutes a theater of memory. People show up who haven’t been around in years, living ghosts from stories long forgotten. Eulogies relate stories of the deceased; anecdotes told over coffee and at the wake add more. However somber in its demeanor, the funeral liturgy delivers the impact of an action movie. All these memories fashion presence in the face of absence.

Resurrection is not resuscitation: it does not bring the Old Life back again. Resurrection is new life entirely.

At the Christian funeral, however, a different presence presides. All the shards of a life now ended come together into new narrative: the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. These pieces become a new creation in the resurrected body of Christ. I heard this conviction powerfully expressed at a recent funeral. The man had Alzheimer’s, and he died by inches. But he hated eulogies at funerals, convinced that the pastor should “just talk about Jesus.” His wishes were honored: the presiding minister had to speak about this man in the context of the life of Jesus. The sermon integrated these pieces of the man’s life into the gospel. Christ’s story framed his life; Christ’s body became his final resting place.  

In Lament for a Son, Nicholas Woltersdorff chronicles his own grieving process for his son who died climbing in the Swiss Alps. Of the memorial he writes, “I dreaded the prospect, but the funeral gave rest to my soul.” Consolation came, not through the many stories people shared of Eric, but through the central story of which Eric was now a part: Christ’s. “It was a liturgy which both thanked God for the presence of Eric among us and expressed our grief upon his no longer being present. It sang of the hope of resurrection.” Resurrection is not resuscitation: it does not bring the Old Life back again. Resurrection is new life entirely.

15 Thanks to my colleague at Augsburg College, Dr. Kristin Anderson, for both the story and the permission to share it.
16 Nicholas Woltersdorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 38.
17 Ibid.
18 The point is powerfully made in Ronald Rolheiser’s The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 146.
Baptism begins the story, as Christians are taken up into the life and death of Christ. The funeral celebrates a Christian’s last passage into the resurrection of Christ. Romans 6 proclaims faith’s hope, either in the form of a prayer or Scripture reading: “so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). The funeral becomes a “vehicle of resurrection thinking,” or more aptly, “resurrection living.” Now fully incorporated into the body of Christ he entered at baptism, Eric joins the ranks of the really, really alive. That conviction, expressed in word, deed, and memory—speaking up, acting out, and remembering—gave rest to his father’s soul.

**BEING RE-MEMBERED**

But what about those who are left behind? Loss leaves an emptiness that cannot be denied, ignored, or pretended away; it creates a vacuum anything can fill. My friend’s loss left her with rage and resentment. Another woman relates a different experience. She lost her five-year-old to cancer:

> I don’t talk about this very easily…but it was pivotal for me. It changed my life—jelled it in a profound way. I have an image that comes to mind about that time. It’s of a white fire roaring through my life and burning out what was superficial, frivolous, and unimportant and leaving a core of… I don’t think there’s any other word for it than love. A core of love. It’s hard to convey what that means.

Loss registered very differently for these two women. What ensures that its vacuum will fill with love and not anger?

Nothing guarantees a positive outcome, for the agency here belongs solely to the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus. Yet, as a practice of resurrection, the Christian funeral promises a new creation, not only to the one who is dead, but to those who remain. Those left behind will quite literally be re-membered; like broken toys, they will be put back together again in the body of Christ.

What the dead experience in full belongs in hope to those who are left behind: the promise of new life.

Practice resurrection.

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