



# STONES OF *emembrance*

*Beyond the Funeral Service*

There is a tendency in funeral services to talk too much. We talk, I suspect, out of fear: fear of our own death, fear of being alone in our grief, fear that we've got it wrong about what happens when someone dies, fear of losing the presence—even in memory—of someone we love. We want to tell the stories, and like Scheherezade, we fear that when the stories end, there will be another death, the death of our memories.

To complicate matters, we are surrounded by a culture that denies death. Our middle class churches have mostly given in to pressure to turn over the management of death to commercial interests that attempt to cover death's pain with a cosmetic approach, supposedly "making things easier on the family." We have foreshortened the time we allow the grieving to be publicly sad. We want quick recovery despite convincing evidence from psychologists indicating that the healing from the loss of a close loved one nearly always corresponds in length

to the traditional year of mourning practiced by earlier generations. Furthermore, the practice of holding a wake or vigil on the night before a funeral has all but disappeared in Protestant circles, though fifty years ago, such a gathering at the home of the deceased was customary and provided ample time for the kind of personal storytelling that now sometimes intrudes on the funeral service itself.

*No one ever  
told me that grief  
felt so like fear.*

—C. S. LEWIS

## WE PROCLAIM ONE STORY

The benefits of storytelling as a memorial and as a vehicle for healing are obvious, and yet, if we listen to theologians and liturgists, the funeral service has its own logic and flow, as well as its own story to tell. An open invitation to "share memories" may not be appropriate to the pattern of "proclamation and response," "thanksgiving and communion" that has framed since its beginning the church's witness in worship to God's promise of life.

The funeral service, if we follow the traditions of Christian worship, will be a proclamation in word, music, and gesture of our faith in God's power over death. It will speak hope to the grieving faith community and give evidence to all present of our belief in the resurrection. The sermon, scripture readings, prayers, and hymns will be united in their witness to the gospel. Thus the urgency of the traditional elements of a funeral will allow time for including only those personal memories of the deceased that serve the preaching of the gospel.

The preacher at the funeral will proclaim, in a way that may evoke the life of the person who died, that we are in life and death embraced by God's love and, as the words spoken at our baptism state, "that dying and being raised with Christ, [we will] share in his final victory." The Service of Death and Resurrection in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* does allow for a brief time of "Naming" and "Witness" following the sermon, but the rubrics imply that these are liturgical acts, reminders of the deceased's naming as a child of God at baptism or prayers of "thankfulness to God" for the grace received in the life of the deceased. The difficulty faced by worship planners comes from the aspects of a funeral or memorial service that appear to be in some

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dissonance: We gather to acknowledge the reality of pain and sorrow accompanying the death of a particular individual, and yet we offer thanksgiving and rejoice together in the communion of saints. The family, we know, may be so overwhelmed with their personal grief that they are as yet unable to feel the bond with “all the saints who from their labors rest” or to see that their sorrow is one with the sorrow of a world longing for Christ’s final victory over the forces of death. The congregation needs to know these things, and yet what the family often seems to want is more personal stories.

The answer to this dilemma could be, I think, first, to strengthen the funeral as a service that proclaims the gospel and is our principal ministry to the grieving through its affirmation of the love of God who makes all things new and, second, to offer additional occasions for allowing the primary mourners to express their grief in prayer and find comfort in storytelling. We can find new ways to embrace the family with the prayers of the community before the funeral begins and long after it ends. We, as pastors and congregation, can help lead services of prayer and remembering that extend the message of hope to the longer period of grieving and affirm the memories by connecting them to the funeral’s central proclamation.

## THE RESPONSE OF A CARING COMMUNITY

When Joshua led the Hebrew people across Jordan into the Promised Land, he knew they needed a reminder of what had gone before, of Moses and the ancestors who died in the wilderness, and of the “living God” who pitched a tent among them. He asked representatives of the people to bring stones and pile them up by the river as a memorial. The stones alone were not the memorial, but the stones were there so the children in time to come would ask questions and be told the stories of their ancestors and of God’s great act of snatching the people away from death (Josh 3-4). Stones of remembrance elicit stories, and stories keep hope alive. For generations, Jews have carried stones of remembrance to the cemetery and placed them on the graves of loved ones.

Stones in the Bible carry varied facets of meaning. Moses struck a rock and life-giving water poured forth. Peter was called “Rock,” and it was the rock of Peter’s faith that Jesus used to build the church. In the Psalms God is our rock and our salvation, or as the Spiritual says, “My God is a rock in a weary land.” All these images speak to us as a community and help us respond to those among us who are in sorrow, not just at the funeral but also at other gatherings of family and friends at the time of death and throughout the year. How do these images suggest ways to bring together the prayers of the church and the longing of the grieving to keep memory alive?

By calling for additional opportunities for remembrance, I don’t intend to add another burden to the impossible schedule that pastors face when a death in the congregation disarranges an already overfull week. I am proposing that well-designed, brief prayer services which encourage participation by family and friends of the deceased can become a part of the pastoral care we give the grieving in our congregations. Some such services can be led by lay worship leaders who participate in their planning and receive training for leadership roles. In certain situations, a prayer service designed by a congregation’s worship committee

or pastoral staff can be attractively printed and handed to a grieving family for use in their homes at whatever time seems appropriate. A member of the congregational care or nurture committee might consider, for example, taking to the home a simple ritual that can be followed easily at a mealtime gathering before or after a funeral, on the anniversary of a death, or on the birthday of a loved one who has died. Other services prepared in advance may be useful guides for pastors on the occasions of the visit to a deathbed, the gathering of family to plan a funeral, the time of visitation at a funeral home, or the meal after a funeral. These services will be rituals of memory and hope, a time for stories, favorite hymns, prayer, scripture, and reflection, silent or spoken.

## KEEPING TIME WITH GRIEF THROUGH THE CHURCH YEAR

Worshipping communities can, in addition, prepare rituals at various times during the year that reach out to members who have lost loved ones. The naming of the dead on All Saints’ Day is one example. Another is the special services some churches offer during Advent for families and individuals for whom the pain of loss will be especially sharp at Christmas. The early liturgists who formed the church calendar must have been aware that “Christmas joy” often presents an affront to grieving households, for they placed three commemorations of martyrs’ deaths immediately after December 25. Remembering St. Stephen’s Day,

December 26, can be an appropriate alternative to silently enduring the heedless pursuit of happiness that is the preoccupation of the secular season. Stephen’s story reminds us of his concern for the poor, and, most significantly, we see through the memory of his death, celebrated in the midst of Christmastime, that birth and death are never far from each other and that the center of our Christmas celebration is the remembrance of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection.

Lent and Easter present a singular opportunity to minister to the grieving, and we are reminded to hold those who sorrow in prayer as we find ways to connect them to the observances of the season. The committee who prepares services or provides the take-home devotions during Lent might consider including special prayers for those who have lost loved ones. Small group discussions—possibly in a midweek Lenten study series—can invite participants to tell their own stories of loss. The sessions can be linked to the Lenten scripture readings that focus on Jesus as our comfort and hope. John 11 comes immediately to mind with its moving account of Jesus’ weeping with Mary and Martha over Lazarus’s death. Lenten worship services might include dramatic readings or guided meditations based on this passage and others that speak of Jesus as living water, the light of the world, the bread of life.

In other words, we can offer the support of the community through encouraging those in grief to join the journey we take with Jesus to Jerusalem, the witness to his death on the cross, the remembrance of God’s grief over the death of an only Son who was sent to save the world God loves, and the proclamation of the empty tomb with its promise of final victory. Our oneness as a community who suffers together and rejoices together should be most evident in the Easter communion of the Eucharist and through the communal reaffirmation of our baptismal covenant, acts through which we attest to God’s power to bring life out of death.

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# PLANNING

## a Family Service of Remembering

The following ritual is offered as an example of a service that can be held at a gathering the night before the funeral or at a meal served in the church dining room or family home following the funeral. There may be friends or relatives who would like to participate in the planning or serve as leader or readers. Suggestions for hymns and scripture should come from close friends or family. Other persons may be asked to create a worship center as follows: On a table, covered in a white cloth, are placed a lighted candle, a Bible (if possible, one that was used by the deceased) opened to an appropriate favorite passage, and a large, clear bowl of water. A favorite photograph and flowers may also be placed on the table. Before the service begins, small stones are distributed to all who would like to participate in the acts of remembering. The stones may be from a collection of the deceased, or they can be gathered by younger members of the family earlier in the day.

### STONES OF REMEMBRANCE

*Friends and family gather around a table which holds an open Bible, a lighted candle, and a clear bowl of water. Before the Gathering, someone—possibly a child—may distribute small stones for the participants to hold in their hands and later bring to the table.*

### GATHERING

LEADER: Jesus calls to all who are heavy with grief and care: “Come to the mercy seat; come to the feast of love. Here bring your wounded hearts; here tell your anguish.” May our common sorrow and our common love bring us to the healing water that flows from the throne of God.

**Hymn** [Suggestions: “Shall We Gather at the River” (UMH 723), “O God Our Help in Ages Past” (UMH 117)]

**Psalm 121** (UMH 844), [This or another favorite psalm is read antiphonally or in unison.]

**Musical Response** [an instrumental solo or another hymn]

### READING AND REFLECTION

LEADER: We invite you to listen to God’s word and find in the reading comfort and hope as we keep a brief period of silence.

**Scripture Readings** [Suggestions: John 14:1-7, Rom 8:18-37, presented by one or more readers]

### SILENT REFLECTION

### ACTS OF REMEMBRANCE

LEADER: The stones we hold in our hands are stones of remembrance, reminders our loved one Name, whose memory lights our hearts with grace and whose absence fills our nights and days with sadness. Let us give thanks for the gift of Name’s life among us. I invite you now to share with us the gift of a memory.

### STORIES, THOUGHTS, AND POEMS

*[Participants have been asked to prepare a story about the deceased or to present a favorite reading]*

### INVITATION TO PRAYER

LEADER: All who wish are invited to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of Name. Please close your prayer by saying: “Name’s memory is a blessing forever. Amen.”  
*[The leader allows time for spoken and silent prayers.]*

### CLOSING PRAYER

LEADER: Gracious God, we thank you for the life of Name and for the joy of loving and being loved by her/him. We know that you are tender and caring, ready to shower us with your mercies that are new every day. Shelter us in the shadow of your wings; teach us the song of hope that comes with your presence. Give us courage to wait, surrounded by your great cloud of witnesses, for the promised resurrection. Through Jesus Christ, who lived and died and lives again. Amen.

LEADER: As we sing our closing hymn, I invite you to come to the table and place your stone of remembrance in the bowl of water. Then we will all join hands and continue singing together.

**Hymn** [Suggestions: “There Is a Balm in Gilead” (UMH 375), “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (UMH 557)]



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