

# Do You Believe This?

LUCY HOGAN

*Christ the Victorious,  
Give to your servants  
rest with your saints  
in the regions of light.  
Grief and pain ended,  
and sighing no longer,  
There may they find  
everlasting life.*

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Jesus proclaimed to Martha, angry and filled with grief after the death of her brother, that those who believe in him, “even though they die, will live.” He then asked her an important question, “Do you believe this?”

Do we believe this? Do we believe that Christ is victorious? Do we believe that grief, pain, and sighing will be no more? Do we announce this good news to the world?

Each day, whether it is a family member, a friend, a friend of a friend, or a disaster in the community, we are confronted by the finality of death. My godmother, who is in her late eighties, tells me one of the most difficult things about growing older

is that everyone you know is dying. At least once a month, if not more often, she is attending the funeral of a friend, and it is never easy.

When we hear of those deaths, whether it is a person we love or the tragic deaths of people on the other side of the world, our response, like Martha, is often a combination of sadness and anger. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21). If God truly loved us, we think, God would not make us go through the pain and agony of losing those we love. “Save us,” we pray, “from the time of trial.”

## Controversies

One of the earliest controversies in the church was about death. The community had been taught that the followers of the risen Christ would not die before Christ

came again. But as the years passed, members of their community began to die—and still no Christ. Were those who had died early lost, they asked? In his first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul assured them that “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. . . . Therefore encourage one another with these words” (I Thess. 4:15, 18).

While Paul may have answered the question about the relationship between those who have died and their final resurrection, our age is not without its own controversies. Today, we would like to do away with death all together. We want to ignore its reality by ignoring it and avoiding any mention of it. In our not too recent past, family, friends, and the church were intimately involved in the death.

I live in an older section of Washington, D.C. I don’t have to go very far before I find an old home with a double front door. Those doors were not

decorative. They were designed that way so that the casket could be brought into the home for the wake. Most people were born and died in their home. There the body was washed and prepared for burial by their family. And the casket was set up in the parlor to be viewed by friends and neighbors. Most people today die in a hospital, and our first action is to call the funeral director.

We need to hear Paul's admonition to encourage one another with words of hope anew. But too many of our churches are uncertain and afraid when confronted with death. As true children of the Enlightenment, we have been raised on certainty and having all of the answers. When we don't have all of the answers, when we can't explain, we realize that these people have valid questions, and we are often paralyzed. We think death is a sign of failure, and we want to ignore and avoid any mention of it. Too often, therefore, it is the secular world, not the church that is guiding and dictating what happens at the time of death and at the funeral.

### ***Difficult Funeral***

We need to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be a Christian when confronting death? How is it different?

Some years ago I received a phone call from a family who had just left our congregation to move to a new home and job several states away. They had been there only a few months when the whole family decided to go for a hike to explore the mountains near their new home. Their eight-year-old daughter ran ahead on the path. A movie crew had recently made a movie in those mountains and during the filming they had removed the barriers on the path. Unfortunately, they had neglected to restore the barrier that kept people from falling off the cliff, and the child plunged to her death. Since they did not know anyone in their new town, they wanted to come back to Washington where her funeral could be among her friends and classmates.

It was one of the most difficult funerals I have ever participated in. No one could

understand how this could have happened? How could we explain?

In the language of the world we could not explain. In the certainty that the secular culture often demands, we did not have an answer. But we did have the good news given us by Christ. As Christians, we could tell the family and the friends that mourned her loss, that God loves her and loves them. We could cry with them, and not see that as weakness. We could invite them to share their stories about her—all the funny things that she did, and what a good friend she was. And we could remind them that there would be a time in the future that, like her, we too would die, and join in the everlasting community of the saints.

Christians are able to look ahead and see that death is not the end, but a beginning. We live in the light of the Resurrection and proclaim with joy that, though we die, yet shall we live.

My 95-year-old grandmother is ready to die. She has been making the plans for her funeral for a number of years. She has always been one to be in charge, in control, and well organized, and didn't feel any differently about her death. When I was a child, she and my grandfather loved to travel. At one point my grandfather gave her a leather train case—and it went with her all over the world. A few years ago my grandmother announced to me that the train case was going to take her to the next world. "I am going to be cremated, and I want to be buried in my train case!" She is ready for the journey home where the saints who have gone before her will greet her. She is ready to join in the everlasting banquet where there will be no pain or grief.

In the following articles you will hear from people who do believe that to be a Christian does make a difference when one is facing death. These are people who believe that the Christian community is able, with the grace of God, to reach out to those who mourn and lessen the grief and pain. And they believe that we are here to encourage one another with the words that proclaim, in Christ, we have everlasting life. □



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