

LIVING HOPE IN A GRAVEYARD

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: O Lord of Life, You have given us life, and by Your Son, You have redeemed us and promised us life eternal in Your kingdom. Help us who often sit in sorrow and under the shroud of death to find hope in Your promise of the resurrection. Grant that we may bear witness to Christ's life through the hope You give us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

When you think about cemeteries, or when you happen to drive by one, what things come to mind? Some people may have a loved one buried there, and memories of that person's life might flood the mind. Others may find a stark reminder of their own mortality which may get them thinking about where they would like to be buried one day. If you have ever seen the movie *A League of Their Own*, you might recall that the players on the bus passing by a cemetery crossed their fingers believing if they did not, they would never get another hit. Some people think that they need to hold their breath while passing by a cemetery otherwise they might breathe in evil spirits. As Christians, we ought to be reminded that cemeteries are a result of mankind's fall into sin.

Read Genesis 3:19, Psalm 89:46–48, and Romans 6:23a.

What do these passages tell us about sin and its consequences?

According to Ecclesiastes 9:1–6, is anyone spared from facing the reality of death? Why?

Hope in a Graveyard?

Graveyards can indeed be places that bring emotions of sorrow and longing but also fear into the lives of people. The fact that our loved ones are often laid to rest in cemeteries, and the fact that one day we shall, too, (barring Christ's return in glory before then, of course!) can make us feel a deep sense of sorrow. However, there is hope to be had, even in a graveyard.

When my daughter was about four years old, we were driving through our town and happened upon the local Catholic cemetery. This was before we had had any serious conversations about

death, even though she had already been to a few funerals of beloved parishioners at church. Death was not a new concept to her; we just had not talked about it much with her at such a young age. On this particular day, however, without any prompting, she said from the back seat, “Daddy, is that where people go to meet Jesus?” Sometimes children have a much better way to see the world than adults do! For her, the cemetery was not a place of sadness and sorrow, but a place where people go to meet Jesus. And, in a way, she had uncovered a very deep theological truth that points us to a living hope, even in a graveyard.

Read Ezekiel 37:1–14.

What does the Lord promise to do for the people of Israel?

What actually brings life to the dry bones?

What story does this bring to mind from earlier in the Old Testament?

How do these stories relate to our hope in the resurrection?

Read the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Small Catechism along with Luther’s explanation. **What do we confess will happen when Christ returns in glory?**

How can this help us overcome our sorrow around cemeteries?

Jesus and Graveyards

As Christians, we have hope, even in the face of death. We confess the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” in confidence because on Good Friday Jesus himself underwent our death so that on Easter He could overcome it by His own resurrection. He has walked the way we all must go not because of His sin but because of ours, and He has won the victory for us so that we may have hope. It is true, however, that we still find ourselves sorrowful standing by the grave of someone we love. By His grace, this is also where Jesus meets us to remind us of His eternal promises.

Interestingly, Jesus did not make a grand entrance on Easter announcing to the world that He had risen from the dead. Instead, His first encounter with the world was in a graveyard.

Read John 20:1–18.

Why had the women come to the tomb that Easter morning?

What did they find instead?

Why do you suppose Mary Magdalene was so overcome with grief?

What did the gardener (Jesus!) say and do for her to help her?

How might this account aid you, or someone you know, who struggles with grief?

Before Easter, however, Jesus had encounters in graveyards that foreshadowed the work He would accomplish by His resurrection. Read Mark 5:1–20.

Why do you suppose the man was living among the tombs?

How does his malady relate to the malady of sin?

What does Jesus' healing foreshadow for him and for us?

Hope in a Graveyard!

Many people today want to keep death out of their spiritual life. They know death is coming at some point, but delaying its arrival has become one of the aims of the medical arts, and even the desire of well-meaning Christians. Churches that happen to have graveyards on their property, and even surrounding the church building, actually offer a tangible reminder of the hope we have, even when members confront the reality of death each Sabbath by simply walking into church. Being reminded of the saints that have gone before us and living in the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is something that should give us a sense of peace and not cause us to remain in sorrow.

Read John 12:20–25.

What does Jesus indicate He is about to undergo?

**What does He say is the result of the seed of His body being tucked into the earth?
What does He mean by fruit?**

Now take a look at Romans 6:1–11.

How are we buried with Christ?

Where does this happen for us?

What is the promise given to those who die with Christ?

How might we continue to find joy in this promise on a daily basis?

Finally, read 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–49.

What is our hope, even as we are laid into our own grave?

How do we know this is true?

How can this help us to give a hopeful witness to those who are caught in sorrow?

Conclusion

Graveyards can be things that are scary or mysterious. For some they are superstitious, and for many they are places filled with sorrow. However, for Christians graveyards are places that speak of the hope we have in Christ and of the resurrection. They are places where our Lord meets those who sit in sorrow and fills them with living hope, and they are places where the faithful await the day of their own raising on the Last Day to the joy of life eternal. That is our hope, even in the face of death, for as Paul reminds us at the conclusion of his great resurrection chapter, *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* (1 Corinthians 15:56–57). Christ

has won the victory for us. The grave cannot hold Him, and it will not hold us as Jesus raises us to life eternal.

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, Your Son has overcome death and the grave by His own resurrection from the dead. Fill us with the joy of Easter, and grant that we may live always in the hope of our unending life with You in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sing or read the hymn “Jesus Lives! The Victory’s Won,” *LSB* 490, focusing especially on stanza 5.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Living Hope in a Graveyard, by Rev. Brian Noack, Sayville, New York
Copyright © 2023 Lutheran Women’s Missionary League. All rights reserved.

lwml.org