

LIVING HOPE IN A GRAVEYARD

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a Bible and a copy of Luther's Small Catechism as well as a copy of this study for all attendees.]

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?

The curse of sin is what brings death to humanity and to the creation God has made. Thus, all must undergo death, for that is the wage we earn by our sinfulness. This is also why we understand our time on earth to be short, which is not what God intended for us from the beginning.

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

Why?

No one is spared from this reality, neither the righteous nor the unrighteous, for all have sinned, and death is the consequence. As Christians, however, we face death with the hope of the resurrection through Jesus Christ.

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 too 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?

The Lord's promise is that He will raise up His people from their graves. This will take place as the Word of God is proclaimed, calling people away from death and toward the life He gives in Christ.

What actually brings life to the dry bones?

When the breath of God is breathed into the dry bones of Israel, life is fully restored to God's people. This breath is the Spirit of God, who is the Lord and giver of life, as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

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

This account from Ezekiel brings to mind the creation of man from Genesis 2.

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

In Genesis, God formed man out of the dust of the earth, but it was not until God breathed into him the breath of life that the man became a truly living being. This story from Ezekiel is also a foreshadowing of what shall happen on the Last Day when Christ comes again in glory. At that time, He will wake the dead, raising them in their bodies, changing them eternally, and bringing them into life in His kingdom forever.

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?

On the Last Day, Christ will raise all the dead and will bring His faithful into His kingdom forever, to dwell in righteousness and purity.

How can this help us overcome our sorrow around cemeteries?

When we understand that this is what will happen in the end, we can find comfort to know that our loved ones will be raised and that we are assured we will see them

again in their resurrected bodies. As such, the separation we feel at cemeteries is only temporary. Whatever struggles our loved ones, or we ourselves experience, will give way to eternal healing and life.

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?

The women came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, to prepare the body properly, for they had lain Jesus there in haste due to the impending Sabbath. It was a demonstration of care and love for their teacher and friend.

What did they find instead?

They found the tomb open and the body of Jesus missing.

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

Finding the body missing is likely what led Mary to such grief, for all she longed for was to see her Lord once more, and to perform this act of care for Him. It is not much different than those who are comforted by seeing their loved one made up and lying in an open casket. They find some sense of relief by seeing them once more, cleaned up, and no longer suffering.

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

The gardener, Jesus, comforted Mary by calling her by name and enabling her to touch His resurrected body, albeit briefly. As such, the reality of His resurrected life became real for her, and perhaps all the words Jesus had said concerning this event began to make sense to her.

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

This account of Jesus’ resurrection can aid people going through grief by assuring them not only of our Lord’s defeat of death but also how He comes to us in our moments of grief to comfort us with His assurance. He fills us with hope by calling us

by name, the name He called us in Holy Baptism. He also grants us the opportunity, briefly, to touch Him as He feeds us in the Lord's Supper. These sacred gifts point us ahead to the eternal promises of being in our Lord's presence forever.

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?

In many ways, it was a place where he could get away from others so no one would bother him. Likely, people let him live there because he was out of the way, disconnected from everyday life.

How does his malady relate to the malady of sin?

Symbolically, however, the man was, in a way, dead. His demon possession was a symptom of sin, as it is for us today. We all carry with us the reality of sin in such a way that it takes hold of us, leading us toward darkness and death.

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

As Jesus heals this man, it sets him free from sin, calling him to a new life outside of the graveyard. So it shall be with us! Christ has cast out our sin by His cross and promises that we shall be given the new life of the kingdom where we shall leave behind death and the grave eternally.

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?

Jesus is about to undergo His glorification, and yet it is a glory that is far different than the world's. His glorification would be evident as He is lifted up on the cross for all the world to see the salvation of God. In His death, Jesus takes away the sin of the world, and by His resurrection, He overcomes death to give life to all.

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

What does He mean by fruit?

By His death and burial, like a seed planted in the soil, He will bear much fruit. Such

fruit is faith given to God's people which leads to a new life here and eternal life in His kingdom.

Now take a look at Romans 6:1–11.

How are we buried with Christ?

When we are joined to Christ in our Baptism, we are buried with Him.

Where does this happen for us?

The Old Adam in us is drowned in those waters so the New Adam may arise to live in Christ here and eternally. As a result, death is not something that we need to fear, and it is not something we should do everything we can to avoid. Death will come because of sin, but by the grace of God in Christ, we are buried with Jesus.

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

He has overcome death by His resurrection, and if we are connected to Him, we will come through death into the life He gives us eternally.

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

As Luther suggests, our Baptism is a daily activity where the sinner is put to death so that the saint may be raised to life. As this occurs, we then live in hope that when our last death comes so will come the resurrection to life eternal, following the pattern of Jesus Himself!

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

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

Our hope is that what is sown into the earth is something that is perishable, yet the perishable will give way to the imperishable and we will be raised to unending life.

How do we know this is true?

We know this is true because this is what Christ has already undergone for us and before us, promising that we shall follow Him into this eternal life He gives.

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

As we stand by the graves of those we love, either at their funeral as the casket is lowered into the earth, or in subsequent years as we remember them, we do so in the hope that the perishable will put on the imperishable. That which undergoes death in faith will be raised to life. Christ is the first-fruits of the resurrection, but much more fruit shall follow in the saints of God whom He raises to life. Death, for the faithful, is but the gate to life eternal through Jesus Christ!

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.

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