

Column

Not everyone finds churchyards and cemeteries intriguing and important. Once I had a member of our church who was legally blind. After his wife died, he moved away but on occasion would return for a visit. Several times, I asked him if he would like me to walk him to the place of his wife's interment. Both times, he answered, no; he would rather remember her alive.

While I understand and respect his sentiment, I do not share it. I believe places of burial serve an important purpose. I find value in visiting those containing the mortal remains of family members as well as those where I don't know a single soul.

"The combination of architecture, sculpture, landscape, wildlife and poetry makes cemeteries like no other place in the historic environment," one observer said. I concur.

During the Covid pandemic, I would frequently drive to the next town over, pick up some food from a restaurant, and take and eat it in the tranquil quietness of a country churchyard. When finished, I would often walk through the rows of markers looking at names and dates. Some were well over 100 years old.

Why the fascination with graveyards? Three reasons stand out.

First, places of burials speak of the past. The names on the stones represent people who made their mark in a given community, hopefully for good but sometimes for ill. As with people alive today, each stood in need of the grace of God and hopefully received it.

Moreover, if the place you are visiting has graves of relatives, you are looking at your past. None of us came into the world like the biblical Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-20, Hebrews 7:3), "without father or mother." We are part of a line going back to that primeval pair spoken of

in Genesis. We have roots and are part of the stream of history in which there is both good and bad.

Secondly, places of burial have a message for the present. They remind us of the brevity of life. In the words of the hymnwriter Isaac Watts: "Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away."

Practically these gray and often moss-covered stones encourage us to seize each day's opportunities. In the words of C.T. Studd, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."

And finally, places of burial point us to the future . . . for those who have given their allegiance to Jesus, a glorious future. For them, the best is yet to come.

Upon death, St. Paul teaches us that that we depart (seemingly our 'spirits') to be with the Lord (Philippians 4:23). But more glorious still will be the day when Jesus appears the second time bringing with Him those who have departed in advance of His coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14-16).

The work of redemption will then be complete. Tombs, either literally or metaphorically, will break open, and Jesus' redeemed people will come forth with bodies which have continuity with our present ones but not absolute identity.

These bodies will be like the body with which Jesus came out of the grave on Easter morning. According to 1 Corinthians 15, they will be animated by the Spirit and not by the natural processes as bodies are in the present. What a glorious thought: these bodies will not need joint replacements, hearing aids and glasses. They will be perfectly suited for life in the new heavens and new earth foretold in Revelation 21. When you pass rows of monuments, see them for what they are, time capsules.

Putting all this together, churchyards and cemeteries are more than monuments to the past and guides to the present. They point to God's future and the wiping away of all tears.

Whether you visit them or not is a personal choice, but failure to take hold of the hope found in Jesus, the Source and Giver of life, spells incalculable loss. Receive Him.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities [weaknesses], and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, Book of Common Prayer).

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