

Life, Death, and Life Again

Natural Burial and Resurrection Promise

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Introduction

TODAY, OUR CULTURE SEEMS TO DRIFT further and further away from the topic of death. Funerals are now celebrations of life or a simple memorial service long after a loved one has died. Why is this happening? I think the simple fact is that our culture continues to want to deny death at every corner. But here's the crazy flip of that coin: more people today are interested in supporting and passing laws to support physician-assisted suicide, but are not willing to talk about death. As of right now, physician-assisted suicide is legal in eleven states in the U.S., with fifteen more states considering making it legal. As Christians, we should be appalled by this number.

Yes, the “proper term” is Death with Dignity or Medical Aid in Dying, but let's be honest, it truly is physician-assisted suicide. How can so many people support allowing a loved one to commit physician-assisted suicide while denying death at every turn? I am truly perplexed by this. There is so much to wrestle with on this topic, but that's an article for another time.

Prior to around the nineteenth century, everyone in a community participated in the death of a loved one, neighbor, or friend. Someone in the community, usually the men, built the coffin, while others went out to dig the grave where the body would be placed. The women typically washed, dressed, wrapped, and prepared the body for viewing in the parlor, while others began preparing meals to support the family. Many gathered at the home of the deceased to sit with the family and, yes, even the dead. Throughout this time, the body of the deceased was present among the living. We sat with our dead, prayed for our dead, and cared for those tending to the body. We spent time—days—with each other in the midst of our dead.

Today is a whole different picture. Typically, when someone dies today, either at home or in the hospital, the “professional” is called in, and the dead are removed from our sight as soon as possible. We have been trained to believe that the bodies of our loved ones, after death has occurred, are not “safe” to be around. Unfortunately, this is so far from the truth. The bodies of our dead are as safe as they were when they were alive.¹

This article invites you to consider what death might look like if we truly embrace it with as much love and passion as we had when our loved one was living. Who knows our loved one better, the professional or those who have loved them their entire lives? The obvious answer is us. So, how do we go about this? What steps do we take now to ensure that our loved one can be cared for before, during, and after death has occurred? We talk about death in the midst of life, and I am asking you to consider burying your dead in the same fashion in which Christ himself was buried, known as natural burial.

Resurrection Promise

BUT WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT DEATH without first reminding the reader that the promise of resurrection looms brightly in the face of death. It's a funny but true story; when Kent Bureson and I were writing our book, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*,² we had the chapter on resurrection as one of the last, if not the last chapter. An editor who read the book stated, "Why are you keeping the great stuff to the end of the book? Move it forward so the promise is first; then you can lay out your case." So, we did, and now it properly flips the book to start with the promise we have in the resurrection.

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). One of my many favorite lines Jesus speaks in relation to life and death is spoken to the thief on the cross next to him. Christ even in death brings forth life. Not in the future, not at some unknown time, but *today*. What a gift we have in that promise. Our death and the death of all Christians is a declaration of victory. This declaration of victory should be proclaimed at every single Christian death or burial, "May God the Father, who created you, may God the Son, who redeemed and saved you with his blood, may God the Holy Spirit, who sanctified you in the water of holy baptism, receive you into the company of saints and angels to live in the light of His glory forever."³ Christ's death and resurrection give us victory, give us life. Because he was raised from the dead, we also will be raised.

Bodily resurrection is one of those great mysteries of our faith. We have no idea what we will look like or what it means to be changed, but Paul provides us a glimpse into the qualities of a resurrected body:

1. It will be changed from perishable to imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:43).
2. It will be glorious (1 Corinthians 15:43).
3. It will be raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:43).
4. It will be a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Once again, we will be molded and shaped by the Great Potter himself, our Creator. Life will return to our bodies in some mysterious way, and our only real image or

pattern of this is Jesus himself. Recognition took a little time, but when he spoke, his disciples and friends knew it was Jesus. So, we too will be known in the new creation.

Another great text to ponder, and one of my favorites, is Ezekiel 37, the story of the dry bones.

So I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, slain that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commended me, and breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great host. (Ezekiel 37:7–10, RSV)

How it happens is not as important as that it will happen. We will have life and breath again and live eternally in the new creation.

Yes, we can’t forget that the new creation will also burst forth. All things will be made new once again. “Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:2–3). God restores his paradise. This is the kingdom of God, where our resurrected bodies will dwell on the resurrected, restored, and renewed earth. This new creation can already, although dimly, be seen in the beauty of creation each day. Open your eyes now to see a glimpse of the new creation. It’s right in front of you, in the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, and the songs of creation. But before this last life, death will occur.

Death and Dying

DEATH IS OUR FINAL PHYSICAL ACT in this life and in this body. Yet, it is a reality that we must all face, unless Jesus returns first. Moreover, it’s a reality we can’t really hide from now or in the future. So, let’s tackle death head-on, with hope, love, and beauty that can be experienced if we are willing to try.

Death does not have to be an agonizing, painful final hurrah. If you receive news of a diagnosis such as cancer or heart failure, almost every individual has options regarding how to spend their time after such a diagnosis. The primary choices usually are: Do you want to fight aggressively to try to live longer? Or do you prefer an alternative, such as palliative care or perhaps even hospice care? Each decision has its pros and cons. However, whatever choice you make, know that it’s your decision, and each offers options and alternatives to the dying process. Furthermore, each should be thoughtfully considered and presented when a life-altering summons arrives at your doorstep.

A note of caution: Don't just accept what the medical professionals tell you. In their world, death is typically seen as failure, and they may want to do everything possible to fight off death, whether a cure exists or not. That is what they have been trained to do. However, remember above all that God is in control of both your life and your death. He is the one who gives breath and the one who takes it away. I want to reiterate what was stated earlier: assisted or non-assisted suicide is not an option. Instead, I want to emphasize that if death is closer than further away, the importance of considering the extent of medical care you opt for is in your hands.

Life is just as sacred and valuable at the end as it is at the beginning. So, allow yourself time to consider your options and don't feel pressured to accept end-of-life care if doing so is against your wishes. For some, they see it no other way, but for others, they find beauty in living each day with intention, making the most of each day. "The key element of dying well is to maintain the relationship and meaningful activities that are a significant part of life.... The virtue of loving our neighbor and the priority of family relationships ... can be both taught and strengthened at the end of life—even by someone with a terminal illness."²⁴ Christianity teaches us to love deeply and to care for both the living and the dying with the grace and peace we are given in Jesus' love.

I typically work with hospice patients, specifically those who are "actively" dying. This is usually within the 24–48 hour window, but not always. Our motto is "no one dies alone." And that has become my motto too. To walk alongside those who are dying is a special time. It's a time in space where the "now and not yet" collide. It's spiritual, it's mystical, it's prayerful, and yes, even beautiful.

Death should be a place each of us learns to walk before we are literally walking in the valley of death. Death should not be a wrestling match between good and evil, but instead a spiritual process of letting go of this world and looking forward to the next. Death is where God does some of his most remarkable work. Walking alongside the dying as they experience death is a unique spiritual experience. Paul helps us visualize this in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Our body will decay and return to earth from which it came, but the spirit, that part of us that is eternal, will remain with Jesus until he comes again.

This, if nothing else, should comfort us in the midst of death and dying. Death is not only a biological phenomenon, "It is a human, social and spiritual event."²⁵ So, how might we participate in it? We start by pushing away the fear, denial, and isolation and invite death back into our lives. We see it for what it is and face it

head-on. One way I've found to do that is to discuss dying openly, not just when it happens, but by walking alongside those who are dying. It is never too early to plan for your death, even while you are fully living. In fact, planning for your death makes your death easier for those who will one day deal with your death.

As for myself, I have completed all the necessary paperwork, chosen and purchased my burial plot, and have shared my loves and desires with all those who may need to participate in helping me reach my goal should death approach sooner rather than later. I've chosen, if at all possible, to spend my final days in my home with music and fresh air, with those I love, those who will remind me of the resurrection promise. Finally, when the day arrives: a wonderful funeral, with my body present at my local church and then buried naturally at my local cemetery, wrapped in a shroud, laid in a basket, and placed directly in the ground until the day of resurrection.

After Death Care

ALTHOUGH BURYING NATURALLY SOUNDS far-fetched at the moment, it's simply a return to the days of our grandparents or great-grandparents. It was a time before the funeral industry gave rise to hiding death completely from our view. This can be one of the most daunting steps because it is so far removed from our culture to sit with, touch, and simply spend time with the body after death has occurred. One of the greatest benefits of participating in after-death care is the affordability of time. Time to be with the one you once loved. It affords time not only to sit with the body, but possibly to wash, dress, and care for it. It allows loved ones to slow down and simply be present in the moment, allowing time to grieve. Unfortunately, today, all of these opportunities have been removed from the family's care. One of my goals is to reclaim this beautiful gift of caring for the body before and after death occurs.

Prior to the twentieth century, almost every funeral was organized and conducted by the family, their church, and the deceased's friends and neighbors. All the duties were shared and carried out by those nearest to the deceased. The body was always present, especially at the funeral, and no one ever considered embalming the body. The body was still considered a gift, a sacred creation of God, and therefore treated with love and respect. As Christians, this can be uniquely different from other religions, where the body is seen as disposable. This is a Gnostic or dualistic perspective, which views all matter as evil and the spiritual as good. Therefore, it is beneficial for Christians to thoughtfully reflect on the gift of the body, not only in life but also in death. This leads to the practice of natural burial, which I will discuss shortly.

But first, we need to discuss the preservation of the body. If, as Christians, we believe that God created and molded each body as a unique and beautiful gift, then

why have we allowed the “industry” to tell us that bodies need to be embalmed? Most people are unaware that embalming *is not* a requirement in any U.S. state. The only caveat is that if you hold the viewing/wake or church service at the funeral home, they will inform you that it is required.

The practice of embalming dates back to ancient Egypt, but in the United States, it only gained prominence during the Civil War. While it’s a long story, the short version is that there was a need to preserve bodies long enough to return them home to their families, as many battles occurred in the heat of summer. This need is understandable, but once the war ended, the “funeral industry” viewed it as an opportunity to make the business of dying more profitable—something families themselves could not provide for their deceased loved ones.

The fact is that embalming is a very intrusive practice that dishonors the body God created. Embalming is a preservation process that drains the body and its cavities of all bodily fluids and replaces them with chemicals, the most familiar of which is a carcinogenic substance called formaldehyde, discovered in 1868.⁶ Its purpose was to slow down the decomposition process and stop the growth of bacteria. Because the chemical typically causes the body to shrivel and change its color to gray or brown tints, morticians began to apply cosmetics and pastes in an attempt to restore color, ultimately making the body appear more lifelike.

Here are a couple of interesting facts. Embalming, not widely used in other countries is predominantly practiced in the United States and Canada. There is a high mortality rate among morticians dying of myeloid leukemia, which is caused by the embalming process. Finally, be aware that embalming typically only preserves the body for about a week. Depending on the mortician and the embalming process used, leakage can begin to occur from the body, which has been known to contaminate the ground and sometimes the water supply.

There are many options available today that are neither invasive nor dangerous to the people caring for the body as alternatives to preserving the body. The primary goal is to keep the body cool before burial. For more information on how to keep the body cool, please see chapter five of *Lay Me in God’s Good Earth*.

So, we’ve decided not to embalm. Great! So, where do we go from here? Now it’s time to consider being involved in caring for our dead. What if we consider returning to our past practices? What if we washed, dressed, shrouded, cooled the body, and placed it in a coffin, and then sat with the body of our loved one until the time had come for the funeral and burial? The main point to highlight here is to be present with the body. I would also suggest considering having the body present for the funeral. The body that was created by God deserves its last moments to be present with the people of God, whether you decide on burial or cremation, before that final act, honor the body by having it present.

Thomas Long, author of *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*,⁷ highlights four ways in which we honor our dead in the Christian funeral rite, rather than having a celebration of life. First, the rite facilitates the final baptismal journey. The one who once lived will live again. Second, it celebrates the creature's ties to the creation. That which sustained the body every day of life now sustains them in death. Third, the funeral remembers the dead as part of the church community, where bread and wine were shared, and Christ was proclaimed repeatedly as the one who has conquered death. And finally, the funeral is a corporate remembrance of the story, God's story of creation and recreation. The story of their death is incorporated into God's story, and the church rehearses that story. "Holy person, holy land, holy community, and holy scriptures... allow us to remember the dead as creatures, bound to earth and to the story of God who hold both the dead and those who will die together within the life-giving soil of a renewed creation."⁸

Natural Burial

BY NOW, MANY SHOULD BE AWARE OF, OR AT LEAST HAVE HEARD OF, "green" or my preferred name, natural burial. Natural burial is simply the best pattern when following Christ's own burial, and it best reflects God's story. Natural burial consists of four primary characteristics:

- Elimination of embalming
- Burial in a biodegradable covering/casket
- Placement of the body directly in the ground without a concrete vault
- And burial in an environmentally conscious burial ground that encourages natural decomposition of the body, in other words, returning it to the earth from which God created it

Why should we be concerned with being environmentally conscious? Because of the vocation of "gardener" that God gave to all humanity in the Garden of Eden. He commanded us to till and keep the garden. One way to do this is to consider burying naturally.

Burial practices today cause so much damage to the environment. Joe Sehee, the founder of the Green Burial Council, observes that each year "we bury enough embalming fluid to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools, enough metal to build the Golden Gate Bridge, and so much reinforced concrete in burial vaults that we could build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit."⁹ Just stop for a moment and think about it, all of this damage in just one year to bury our dead.

So, let's focus our attention on natural burial. There are many options to consider when choosing a biodegradable covering and/or casket. The Gospel of Mark pro-

vides a great picture of what this might look like: “Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God ... brought a linen shroud and taking him down, he wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock” (Mark 15:43,46). Burial shrouds are simply cloths that are wrapped or wound around a person’s body. They can be as simple as choosing a favorite blanket, sheet, or quilt from your home, provided that the material is made from natural fibers like cotton, linen, silk, hemp, or wool. Purchased shrouds are another great option, many of which include a built-in carrying board for easy transportation.

A great resource for purchasing shrouds is Kinkaraco.¹⁰ Esmerelda is the owner and producer of green funeral products. All the shrouds she sells are 100% American-made and are made with natural fibers. They can range from as low as \$275 to as high as \$1,200, but all are designed for natural burial. Once shrouded, a body can be laid directly in the ground.

If a shroud doesn’t seem suitable for you, explore different coffin and casket options. The six-sided “two-pincher” coffin was once favored for burial because it kept the body securely in place. As with shrouds, the option you choose here needs to be biodegradable. So basically, all hardwood options currently used today for caskets are unsuitable for natural burial. Pine is an excellent choice because it is significantly more sustainable. It also grows quickly and is more plentiful in the United States. Other options include bamboo, cardboard, willow, wicker, seagrass, and similar materials. All of these options, along with many others, are sustainable and renewable, leaving a much lighter carbon footprint on God’s amazing creation.

Regardless of the vehicle you select for natural burial, keep in mind that the entire concept revolves around the body decomposing as quickly as possible. In other words, returning it to the ground in which it was created. Burying a body naturally happens best when it is done at a depth of three to four feet, rather than the five to six feet that is commonly practiced today. The reason is that a higher soil stratum layer exists, which is rich in microbes and oxygen that help the body decompose rapidly.

Natural burial provides a way for us to not only care for the body of our loved one after death has occurred, but also the earth that God gave us. Natural burial also best represents the creation and re-creation story of God for His creatures. By placing the body directly in the earth without embalming or sealing it with a vault or grave liner, we minimize damage to the earth. The body does not need to be preserved in any way, because natural burial honors the body as the vessel of God, sown perishable but which will be raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42). When the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, comes down to us, our bodies will be refashioned and recreated in the image of Christ into our spiritual bodies.

Clearly, there are instances when the body cannot be placed directly in the ground, as is the case for a city like New Orleans, Louisiana, which is situated below sea level. In circumstances like this, the body is actually handled much more like Christ's was in first-century Jerusalem. This offers another excellent glimpse into natural burial. In New Orleans, the bodies are placed in tombs that contain crypts where the body is laid out much like Christ was following his death. Mark 16:46b states that they "laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock." Inside the tomb, you will find rock-like shelves called crypts, where the body is placed for a traditional period of one year and one day. Once this time has passed, the tomb is reopened, and the remains—the bones—are moved or swept to the back of the tomb, where they will remain with all those from the past. Typically, these are family tombs, but there are many unknown tombs where a body can be interred when no family information is provided. An interesting fact is that New Orleans is a city where it will be nearly impossible to run out of burial space, as these tombs can be used for hundreds of years.

After learning about these tombs, I was struck by the fact that they are not being replicated across the United States and beyond, as this would certainly solve the problem of burial land for the future. For these types of burials, I would highly recommend a simple shroud wrapping. Another excellent option for natural burial is internment on family land. These practices had been in place for years. When you hear the phrase, "bury me in the back forty," it serves as a reminder of how family cemeteries began. Of course, you should check with your local government, but many of these still exist today as an option for burial.

Another option that many people choose is cremation, considering it a more environmentally friendly alternative to natural burial. And compared to modern burial practices, this is true. But in reality, the amount of fuel used for fire-based cremation to convert solids into gases is approximately 28 gallons of fossil fuels, which emit between 250 and 500 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with temperatures reaching 1700 degrees for up to four hours.¹¹ That is for each cremation.

The number of cremations has skyrocketed since their beginnings in North America, where two options are now available. The first method is the familiar fire-based cremation, while the second is less known but is starting to gain interest. It is called alkaline hydrolysis and is a water-based process that uses chemicals, heat, and pressure to dissolve the body, reducing organic matter to a liquid. This has become an alternative to fire-based methods, aiming to be more environmentally conscious.

What many people don't understand about cremation, regardless of the option chosen, is that cremation is intentionally destructive. The purpose is to incinerate or dissolve as much of the body as possible. After the process is completed, you are left with bone matter or bone fragments, usually about 25% of the human bones,

which neither burn nor dissolve. To obtain the ashes we receive after cremation, these bone fragments need to be pulverized into a gritty sand-like substance. This is done in a machine called a cremulator. What you receive back from the cremation is literally the cremains, which typically weigh between four and six pounds, depending on the person's size, shape, and age prior to cremation. Cremation may be simpler than modern burial practices or even natural burial, but it is certainly not the most environmentally friendly option, nor, in my opinion, God-pleasing.

Resurgam

OUR BODIES, CREATED BY THE HAND of the Creator, are precious in His sight. This is one reason natural burial should be considered a last will and testament, as it best respects the body shaped and molded by the hands of the “original” potter. Death is where God performs His most remarkable work. He brings life out of death, not just once in baptism, but also in our physical death. In that death, Christ will raise up a new creation. Paul reminds us of this in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Bodily resurrection is what is unseen. We've received an unseen glimpse—one of Christ on Easter morning, the ultimate promise of the resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is not a figment of the Christian's imagination. Death will eventually overtake us, but that is not the end of the story. In fact, it's just the beginning. When Christ returns, he will raise every body, the body of those who believe Christ rose from the dead and those who do not. Everyone will be raised. Your relationship with Jesus in this world affects the relationship you will have with Him afterwards, also. In His death and resurrection, He has restored our “right” relationship with God the Father. And Christ's bodily resurrection promise holds true for everyone who trusts in Him. He alone is the resurrection and the life. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5).

So, live today as if it were your last, die with the promised hope we have received in Christ, and lay yourself down in God's good earth and proclaiming, “*Resurgam*” RISE!

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Notes

1. Obviously, if they died of a highly contagious disease, or their body fluids would still carry a contagious disease, then you would want to have a medical professional care for the body.
2. Kent Burreson and Beth Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024).
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 145.
5. Kenneth Doka, *Death and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 11.
6. There are various websites that state when formaldehyde was first invented. One article states the year 1859 by a Russian named Alexander Mikahilovich Buterov, the other states it was discovered by the German chemist August Wilhelm von Hofmann in 1869. Whether the year was 1868 or 1869, for the purposes of this article we will use the date of 1868. <https://www.formacare.eu/about-formaldehyde/history-of-formaldehyde/> and <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3931544/#ref-list1>. Accessed July 10, 2025.
7. Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).
8. Burreson and Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*, 64–65.
9. Quoted in Elizabeth Fournier, *The Green Burial Guidebook: Everything You Need to Plan an Affordable, Environmentally Friendly Burial* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2018), 24.
10. For further information, see <https://kinkaraco.com/>. Accessed August 1, 2025.
11. Burreson and Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth*, 35.

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