

CEMETERY ETIQUETTE

Yes, Memorial Day or Decoration Day marks a time to honor those who died in military service and to remember all our loved ones who have passed on before us. But for many it has simply become the official beginning of Summer - with a four-day weekend, graduation parties, school vacations, visiting campgrounds, opening pools, hosting barbeques, and possibly consuming beverages of all kinds. But this article is not about any of those. It's about intentionally visiting the graves of loved ones.



Please do visit the graves of loved ones. Some people want nothing to do with a cemetery. "It just creeps me out," they say. Others respond, "I gave them flowers while they were living, so I wouldn't have to visit a cemetery." While others remark, "Their soul is in heaven. It's only the shell that remains in the grave. What's the use of visiting a cemetery?" **But actually, it's of great value for you.**

In your reflection gazing upon the myriad of tombstones, you are convicted of your sin and the resulting death but also God's Word that allows us to mourn, not as those who have no hope, but as those who trust in God (1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18). Instead, we are to encourage one another in this hope (THIS IS OUR WITNESS - Every One His Witness teaches this encouragement through the tool of L.A.S.S.I.E - Listen, Ask, Seek, Share, Invite, Encourage). Thus, we speak the words of Psalm 118:17, "*I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.*"

This intentional visit helps you connect with your family heritage. (On a side note: I remember reading once that each of us has two deaths. The first is when we pass away. For a time our families remember us and reminisce. But with each subsequent generation, the memory of us becomes blurry. In time we are completely forgotten and that is our second death. By taking the time to visit the cemetery where your loved one is buried, you are paying your respects. It's a way to honor who they were and all that they did for you. If you have pictures of family from the past, write names, dates, occasions so that subsequent generations will remember. A visit to a cemetery and grave is a simple act of paying our respects, keeping memories alive and giving thanks to the ones who helped shape us into who we are.)

Visiting a cemetery is part of the anticipation for the harvest - the Lord's promised return on Judgement Day. Just as a farmer who visits his ground where he planted the seed

eagerly looks forward to the harvest, we visit the graves of loved ones eagerly anticipating our Lord's return and the resurrection of both the body and soul. Scripture tells us that a grain of wheat must first fall into the earth and die for it to bear fruit – fruit of a resurrection (John 12 23-26). This is the message that I now speak at every committal or grave side service.

But as you plan your intentional visit to the cemetery remember there actually is official Cemetery Etiquette. You can find several websites that list the dos and don'ts when you visit the graves of loved ones. Here is a summary of what I found:

- Do respect all the cemetery rules.
- Do take time to share family history with children or grandchildren visiting.
- Do pray for continued peace and comfort as you remember loved ones.
- Do keep your voices down (and certainly don't blast music).
- Don't go to the cemetery after hours.
- Don't get too close to a funeral in progress (or even visit at a later time).
- Don't speed through the cemetery driveway.
- Don't let the kids run wild - but do bring them along as a teaching moment.
- Don't walk on top of the graves (Normally, the deceased will be facing East in anticipation of the Son, the Light of the World, appearing on Judgement Day.
- Don't touch, sit or lean on the grave markers (unless you are gently cleaning).
- Don't talk to other cemetery visitors - even to say hello.
- Don't leave food, glass, ceramic or other breakable items on the grave. (It is difficult enough for sextons to care for the graves without having to clean up debris.)
- Don't leave trash, pet waste
- Don't make out or get frisky?? (A little "Captain Obvious" here.)
- Don't be a stranger (Visit often because you're always welcome).

You would think that this list of dos and don'ts would cover it. But I have learned in my years of ministry that there are some you wouldn't think to consider. (Remember I told you already that cemeteries have been a place of confusion and adventure to me.) Here is my own personal list of additional "cemetery etiquette" items:

- Do lock your unattended car while attending the grave side service.
I had a committal in Chicago where those participating in this service at the cemetery left their cars unlocked with purses and valuables inside. (Who's going to bother your car at a cemetery, right?) Most of those attending had valuables stolen that day. From that point on, we always had a police escort at our cemetery services.
- Don't cut across the cemetery grounds to get ahead of the procession.

A woman from my Ohio congregation attempted to get ahead of the long procession leaving the cemetery by cutting across the snow-covered grounds. But she was actually cutting across a man-made lake that was completely covered by snow. We had to call 911 to have her rescued from the snares of death in a cemetery. Go figure?

- Do make sure the cemetery sexton has dug the appropriate grave.

At the time of my own mother's funeral, the burial site was in upper lower Michigan (4 hours from the church worship service.) Therefore, we traveled as a family for a planned 1 p.m. committal the next day. When we arrived we discovered that the sexton had dug the wrong grave. He apologized profusely but also told us that he couldn't dig a new one until the following week - **unless we wanted to do it ourselves**. He gave us instructions and we began the arduous task. My father wanted me (the only son) and the other males in the family including my boys to do the task. It took the entire morning to dig the grave and to lower the vault. By the time mourners arrived, they were in shock to see me (someone who they perceived to be a dirty, sweaty sexton) step forward to officiate the committal. There was plenty of "cemetery etiquette broken that day including my boys jumping on the vault to seal grandma in the tomb. This was a teaching moment of what **not to do** at a cemetery.

- Don't forget to "buckle up" an urn while driving the deceased to the cemetery.

The funeral home director actually forgot the urn of the deceased at the nursing home where the service was held. They all took off to the cemetery and I was literally left holding the urn. Therefore, as a gentleman, I strapped "Louise" in the passenger seat and headed to the cemetery. As I was the last one to arrive, all eyes were on me when I opened the passenger door. Laughter broke out with people shouting, "Did you think Louise wasn't safe?" (They obviously forgot to keep their voices quiet.) They called me the pastor who cared for your safety - dead or alive. Actually, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if Louise ended up spilled on my floor mats until I cleaned up the car sometime in the next five years.

- Do check to see if the sexton has placed plywood around the grave before stepping up to start the committal. I wasn't two words into the grave side service when I went down, feet first, to below the grave of our deceased brother in Christ. Besides the gasps, a young child brought the house down with laughter stating, "I really thought our pastor would go up." It was a bad omen to have two feet in the grave as literally hours after the service I was scheduled for surgery. But thanks be to God, all went well.

- Don't ask your children to put flowers on your tombstone while you are alive. According to my children, this is just downright creepy. My wife and I purchased our tombstone so that they wouldn't have to worry about this

detail upon our passing. But evidently to ask them to practice putting flowers on my grave while I'm still alive is "poor cemetery etiquette".

As you can see, a cemetery can be an intimidating place. In the same way the Apostle John ended his Gospel, "I could share many more stories in this article, but..." At a cemetery, you can be overcome with the presence of death. It's a topic many avoid at all costs. But the presence of death compels one to confront the truth: we are all conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5) and the wages of sin is death **but** the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:23). That "but" is critical. Our Triune God is Life, not death. The Triune God is not the Grim Reaper. The one who is the author of death and who holds the power of death is the devil (Hebrews 2:14-15).

And yet, because of tradition, we tend to say things like, "I can't understand how God could do this - take our loved one from us" (for we know that God welcomes us home at death not with death). "Death is a blessing" (the Cross proves that death is not God's will but an enemy to be conquered). "Our loved one will now get their wings and watch over us and still be among us (because Scripture clearly tells us that the departed soul cannot hear us or return to us in Luke 16:19-31).

I have found that the misconceptions about God and death have caused the most upheaval in the lives of my church family. Death is up close and personal to all of us. It causes one to reflect upon sin, heaven, hell, and how one can be saved. The Apostle Paul reflected in Romans 7: "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 7:24-25a). At a time when we need the comfort and peace of our God the most, we mistakenly get angry with Him and even withhold our prayers at the time of one's passing. Death cost God His one and only Son. This Triune God loved the world and you personally so much that He willingly gave His Son so that you would not perish but have eternal life. That's who God is and what He does: God is Love. God is Life. God is for you.

1 Corinthians 15 proclaims that "*just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the Man of heaven*" (1 Corinthians 15:49). Ashes to ashes, dust to dust - but thanks be to God, with faith in the Triune God alone, **DUST LIVES!** God's Word tells us that death is never a blessing but only in faith, "*blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on*" (Revelation 14:13). Only because of the perfect life, atoning death and victorious resurrection of Christ, we do not live lives that end in death, but instead we die deaths that end in life - life eternal. Our Triune God has transformed death into an entrance into heaven. The soul is immediately in heaven and the body rests in sleep until Jesus returns for the judgement of both body and soul (a judgement the soul already knows). Therefore, we confess death for what it is - alien to God - but **remember**

and pray for the Holy Spirit to refresh our hearts with the comfort, peace and hope found in the face of death through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

For this is who the Triune God is: the Lover of the unlovable. The Healer of the broken. The Forgiver of the guilty. The Help of the helpless. The Strength of the weak. The Finder of the lost. In the great resurrection chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul writes: *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain.”* As we worship the Triune God this Memorial Day weekend, we confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - who didn't come to be served, but to serve. This God lives in and through every believer. So cleaning up after a child or changing her dirty diaper - that's God working in and through you. Fixing that meal for someone who is battling cancer or COVID – that's God working in and through you to proclaim that they are loved with an everlasting love. Being bold enough to take a stand (confess) concerning God's will in juxtaposition to the “me” culture of the world today – that's God speaking through you and the Holy Spirit accompanying that Word to make real change.

It seems to me that the best “cemetery etiquette” is to just remember and pray. We remember those who died that we may live in freedom. We remember those who died that we may live in faith. We remember Christ who died that we may live forever. That's the ultimate meaning of this Memorial Day weekend. It is a time to remember, and it is a time to finish what they started.

They were shooting the movie "Yankee Doodle Dandy" on the day after Pearl Harbor. The cast listened as President Roosevelt announced on the radio that the United States was at war with Japan and Germany. At that point, director Michael Curtiz came on the sound stage with Jimmy Cagney. They all listened in silence for the National Anthem to finish. As the women dabbed tears from their eyes and the men were deeply moved, Curtiz said in his best Hungarian accent: "Now, boys and girls, we have work to do. We have bad news, but **we have a wonderful story to tell the world. So let's put away sad things and begin.**"

We pray that our Triune God might use each of us as a vessel to tell His wonderful story (which is also ours) to all the world. **This is an article written on behalf of the Evangelization Team, after all.** Have you ever wondered why Memorial Day is marked in May? Its date doesn't recall some historic battle. Or the start of some war. Or the signing of an armistice. Why, then, May? For a very practical reason. Because it's a time when flowers bloom. Flowers with which to decorate graves (Decoration Day). We put away sad things and begin telling the world there is hope. God is Life. God is Hope.

That leaves me with one last piece of “cemetery etiquette.” **ALLOW YOUR VISIT TO MAKE A CONFESSION OF THE TRIUNE GOD'S TRUTH.** This Memorial weekend, I

will stand before the graves of my parents and grandparents. Their souls are in heaven. My parents (who provided foster care from when I was two days old until they adopted me on All Saints' Day as a 1-year-old) both died of cancer while I was in my thirties - a few years after I began to serve as a pastor. They were proud parents. My mother, as she was dying, sent letters to everyone she knew CONFESSING that her time on this earth was waning, but thanks be to God this is only "so long for now!" She sent one of those to me encouraging me to CONFESS with every breath I take that cancer and death does not have the final word - LIFE does. And even though I am on disability at this time, not able to minister as a pastor does, I am trying to be faithful to my mother's encouragement.

So as I visit the cemetery, please join me in **remembering and praying** that Memorial Day is a time to **CONFESS** that the cemetery is a place of great honor and respect. As a nation, we remember those who served valiantly and bravely in war and laid down their lives selflessly for the freedoms we enjoy every single day. But as you read the head stones and take in the sanctity of the sacred ground of the cemetery you may be visiting, join me in confessing that places like that were never meant to be. God our Heavenly Father didn't create cemeteries, He created a garden - a garden for us to live, not die. He created us to live in peace, not war. God created us to live in unity, we (sinful flesh) have created division. The earth upon which we live was never created to contain the bodies of people. It's sin that makes such places necessary.

But thanks be to God, dry bones live. On Pentecost last Sunday, we rejoiced that the valley of dry bones come to life. And every Sunday, a little Easter, we celebrate, gathered around Word and Sacrament, that God is Life. And even though death is all around us, everything that God has done for us in love, everything God continues to do, is about life. Life restored in Him. (Hasn't the great number of deaths right before our eyes led us to confess that **sin does matter?** Every sin. All sin. Sin separates us from God and one another. Sin kills.) Thanks be to God - we are now living in the abundant life we will live forever. Easter confesses - yes, dry bones live. Life is God's final answer.

There was a time in my ministry that I mistakenly accentuated the soul rather than the body. I too would say, "Well, this body, this shell, isn't who the departed is. The departed is in heaven with God. The soul of the believer is once again joined with God never to be separated again." In an attempt to comfort people with a message that the soul is in heaven - no more pain, no more suffering, no more tears - I did a disservice to the body God created. God is all about life for both the body and soul. So whether the body of the deceased or the cremated ashes are buried, the cemetery is sacred ground where the precious, unique body God created rests until the perishable is raised imperishable on the Last Day (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

Please visit the cemetery where loved ones are buried this Memorial Day. Use it as an opportunity to confess that Easter, Pentecost and Holy Trinity change everything. As Christians, our faith and trust and confession is completely different. Muslims visit the grave of Mohammed. Buddhists visit the cremated remains of Buddha in India. Christian Scientists visit the grave of Mary Baker Eddy in Massachusetts. Mormons visit the grave of Joseph Smith in Illinois. **We have no such place to visit. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!!** God is Life. He comes to us continually with His Spirit and in Word and Sacrament to restore our souls “in remembrance of Him.” He comes to us to give us abundant life - not just in heaven - but right now. Therefore, we confess at the graves of our loved ones who belong to Him - “I, too, shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Triune God.”

DO TALK TO YOUR LOVED ONES WHOM YOU ARE VISITING. Not because your loved ones can hear you (or worse yet, answer you) but because you need to hear yourself confessing and articulating things like – what you have been doing since they passed away, to share your love and to say you miss them, to say that you are continuing to work on what they started, and to confess what you believe about the hope that you have. Their bodies really are there (despite my mother’s faux pas). Because Jesus lives, your loved one in Christ lives. **We are living in a time of hearing.** Seeing all that is going on around us can lead to confusion and give Satan a foothold to lie and deceive. You remember the Ascension Day text from Luke 24. Jesus Himself said, *“forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations...You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48)*. Hearing yourself speak your story at a cemetery helps prepare and equip you to share your faith story with the world.

Tradition has it that some will leave a penny on the head stone to give witness that they visited a grave. Some will leave flowers or plant trees. (But as proper etiquette suggests, don’t leave trash or other items the sexton will have to clean up as they care for the grave.) But as those who live forever in Christ, simply **remember, pray and practice good “cemetery etiquette.”** Remember that death is a real and present enemy - but a **defeated enemy** because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Truly remember how the lives of those before us have shaped our future. Pray for the comfort and peace that comes from the sure and certain hope of a blessed reunion with all the faithful. And practice good etiquette by honoring **both** the body and the soul. The grave is where the body is now resting - a grave that has been hallowed because of Jesus’ three-day rest in the tomb. We have God’s promise that He will awaken the body of our beloved who rests in the grave until they are raised to glory in the eternal presence of our Triune God. We thank God for the lives, bravery, courage and faith of those who have gone before us to set us upon the sure foundation of our Risen and Ascended Savior.

The Evangelization Team encourages you to put away sad things and begin telling your faith story with the world. You may even rehearse your story at a cemetery this Memorial Day weekend. We also encourage you to share your faith stories with us. Send your stories to evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org. What can you share about a visit to the grave of a loved one? We would love to hear your encounters – and maybe some etiquette items I missed. **Don't forget to register for the GALA as well.** Have a blessed Memorial Day in remembrance and prayer!

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20