

“Bereavement Team”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
Sonrise Service
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Luke 24:1-12

*‘But on the first day of the week, at early dawn,
they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared.’*

Luke 24:1

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for those who respond to the challenge of helping others grieve –

Thank you for those who bring consolation just by being there for someone.

Amen

One of the greatest kindnesses we can do for another person is to help
when they have lost a loved one.

When someone has died, the lives of those who remain are disrupted
as they are faced with preparing for the funeral, burial, and reception,
as well as legal and financial decisions,
let alone the emotional distress, which can all be very disorienting.

Fortunately funeral homes and hospices deal with such challenges on a regular basis,
and are able to guide people during their time of bereavement.

In the past though, it was up to the family and neighbors
to gather together and organize for the funeral – even to prepare the body.

We don’t know too much about Jewish burial traditions of the 1st Century
except for what the Gospels tell us.

What we know is that some of the women who were followers of Jesus,
went to prepare his body for burial after hastily placing it in a borrowed tomb.
and they brought spices to anoint the body.

Their biggest concern that early morning, was whether or not
they could find someone to move the rock which covered the tomb.

Jewish burial practices today have their roots in traditions from antiquity
give us some insight of what would have happened had there been a body
for the women to prepare.

These days, “chevra kadisha” is a Jewish burial society – or “bereavement team”,
usually associated with a synagogue,
are composed of female and male volunteers.

They would have their own set of burial plots in a Jewish cemetery,
which they manage and maintain, even to dig the grave.

This group would perform the three stages of preparing a body for burial,
praying and reciting from the Torah while following this general sequence...

Willard, p.2

The body would be uncovered and washed carefully;
Then, ritually purified with water, either by immersion
or by pouring a continuous stream of three buckets of water.
Traditionally, there is no embalming.
The body would then be dried and dressed in burial clothing,

A winding sheet is placed into the casket, as well as a prayer shawl
with one corner of the fringes cut off – never to be used for prayer.
This also means the deceased would no longer be expected
to keep the commandments.

The body is placed in the casket and wrapped in the prayer shawl and sheet.
When possible, dirt from the land of Israel is sprinkled in the casket
and over the person's body.

The casket is closed and then, the bereavement team asks the deceased
to forgive them for any mistakes or lack of respect.
There is no viewing of the body and no open casket at the funeral.

In other parts of the world, caskets are not used,
and the body is placed in the ground, wrapped in the shroud and prayer shawl.
Guards are present until the interment, at which time the Psalms are recited.

The bereavement team assists the family during the seven days of mourning
by organizing prayer services, bringing meals, and
basically helping those who mourn in their need.

In Israel, there is also a group called ZAKA – an acronym that means
“Identifying Victims of Disaster” who respond with emergency teams
to help do just that at scenes of violent accidents – and bombings;
They carefully collect body parts and even blood to ensure their proper burial.
There is another name for this group that means “True Kindness”.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bereavement_in_Judaism

Our congregation has a Bereavement Team – that is like a “chevra kadisha”;
They work with me as the pastor and our minister of visitation, our Shepherds,
and the church office to notify the congregation and assist the family
when a member or a member's loved one, has passed on.

Our Bereavement Team would not be responsible for preparing the body
as this would be accomplished professionals through
a hospital, hospice, cremation society, or funeral home.
Instead, our team helps primarily with planning for a reception held at our church
and assistance during the memorial service itself,
while providing comfort through active concern for the grieving family.

Willard, p.3

Though cultural traditions may differ in terms of “how”,
the needs are the same for “what” must be done
when a person dies to leave this world, and to leave others behind.
Bereavement care is a form of hospitality
at its most basic level and need for us as social beings.
It is ironic that death also serves to bring people together.

John Donne’s Meditation XVII puts it this way:

*No man [or woman] is an island entire of itself;
every [one] is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were;
any [one's] death diminishes me, because I am involved in [humankind].
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

<https://web.cs.dal.ca/~johnston/poetry/island.html>

When we hear of death brought on by accident, or natural causes, or natural disaster,
or for religious and political reasons, or violence – or for no reason at all,
we grieve because we are connected, too, with those lives that were lost.
Jesus of Nazareth died such a death, connected with us in our common humanity
and connecting us with Divinity – with all that is good and true and beautiful
of what it is to be a True Human Being.

Because of their hospitality,
the women who came to properly prepare Jesus’ body for death
were pleasantly surprised to find that was no longer necessary.
They were rewarded for their kindness by being the first to see the tomb was empty
and to receive and proclaim this Good News:
“Christ is risen. He has risen indeed!”

We live in a world that is filled with hostility,
a world that just as cruel and brutish as it was in the 1st Century.
Hospitality is the way Christianity started out
as Jesus’ strategy for bringing the Good News to a desperate world –
even to “conquer” the world with kindness.
It’s time. It’s time for a new Reformation where we work to overcome evil with good–
to overcome hostility with hospitality –
the active concern for others which is the love of God through Christ.
Amen

READER ONE: Inspired by Luke 24:1-12

ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, AT EARLY DAWN,

WOMEN CAME TO THE TOMB WITH SPICES THEY HAD PREPARED
FOR ANOINTING THE BODY OF THE LORD JESUS.

BUT THEY FOUND THAT THE STONE HAD BEEN ROLLED AWAY;
AND WHEN THEY WENT INSIDE,

THEY DID NOT FIND THE BODY OF THE LORD JESUS.

AS THEY WERE SURPRISED AND PERPLEXED BY THIS,
LOOK HERE!

TWO ANGELIC BEINGS STOOD BESIDE THEM IN DAZZLING APPAREL.
AND THESE MESSENGERS SAID TO THEM,

“WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?

HE IS NOT HERE, BUT HAS RISEN!

REMEMBER HOW HE TOLD YOU

THAT THE SON OF MAN, THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY,

MUST BE DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS

OF SINFUL PEOPLE AND BE CRUCIFIED...

BUT ON THE THIRD DAY RISE AGAIN.”

AND THEY REMEMBERED THE WORDS WHICH HE HAD SPOKEN TO THEM,
AND THEY RUSHED OUT FROM THERE

BACK TO THE ELEVEN DISCIPLES AND OTHERS

WHO WERE WITH THEM.

NOW, IT WAS MARY MAGDALENE, MARY THE MOTHER OF JAMES,
JOHANNA, AND OTHER WOMEN WHO WERE WITH THEM

WHO TOLD THIS TO THE APOSTLES;

BUT THE MEN TOOK IT TO BE AN IDLE WOMEN’S TALE

AND THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THE WOMEN.

YET PETER GOT UP, RAN TO THE TOMB, AND LEANED IN...

TO SEE ONLY THE LINEN CLOTHS.

AND HE LEFT WONDERING TO HIMSELF, “WHAT HAPPENED?”

Luke 24:1-12

- [1] But on the first day of the week, at early dawn,
they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared.
- [2] And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
[3] but when they went in they did not find the body.
- [4] While they were perplexed about this,
behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel;
- [5] and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground,
the men said to them,
“Why do you seek the living
among the dead?”
- [6] Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,
[7] that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men,
and be crucified, and on the third day rise.”
- [8] And they remembered his words,
[9] and returning from the tomb
they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.
- [10] Now it was Mary Mag'dalene and Jo-an'na and Mary the mother of James
and the other women with them who told this to the apostles;
- [11] but these words seemed to them an idle tale,
and they did not believe them.
- [12] But Peter rose and ran to the tomb;
stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves;
and he went home wondering at what had happened.

Chevra kadisha[edit]

Main article: Chevra kadisha

The chevra kadisha (אשידק הרבה "holy group") is a Jewish burial society usually consisting of volunteers, men and women, who prepare the deceased for proper Jewish burial. Their job is to ensure that the body of the deceased is shown proper respect, ritually cleansed, and shrouded.

Many local chevra kadishas in urban areas are affiliated with local synagogues, and they often own their own burial plots in various local cemeteries. Some Jews pay an annual token membership fee to the chevra kadisha of their choice, so that when the time comes, the society will not only attend to the body of the deceased as befits Jewish law, but will also ensure burial in a plot that it controls at an appropriate nearby Jewish cemetery.

If no gravediggers are available, then it is additionally the function of the male society members to ensure that graves are dug. In Israel, members of chevra kadishas consider it an honor to not only prepare the body for burial but also to dig the grave for a fellow Jew's body, particularly if the deceased was known to be a righteous person.

Many burial societies hold one or two annual fast days and organize regular study sessions to remain up to date with the relevant articles of Jewish law. In addition, most burial societies also support families during the shiva(traditional week of mourning) by arranging prayer services, preparing meals, and providing other services for the mourners.

Preparing the body — Taharah[edit]

There are three major stages to preparing the body for burial: washing (rechitzah), ritual purification (taharah), and dressing (halbashah). The term taharah is used to refer both to the overall process of burial preparation, and to the specific step of ritual purification.

Prayers and readings from Torah, including Psalms, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are recited.

The general sequence of steps for performing taharah is as follows.

The body (guf) is uncovered (it has been covered with a sheet awaiting taharah).

The body is washed carefully. Any bleeding is stopped and all blood is buried along with the deceased. The body is thoroughly cleaned of dirt, body fluids, and solids, and anything else that may be on the skin. All jewelry is removed. The beard (if present) is not shaved.

The body is purified with water, either by immersion in a mikveh or by pouring a continuous stream of 9 kavim (usually 3 buckets) in a prescribed manner.

The body is dried (according to most customs).

The body is dressed in traditional burial clothing (tachrichim). A sash (avnet) is wrapped around the clothing and tied in the form of the Hebrew letter shin, representing one of the names of God.

The casket (aron) (if there is one) is prepared by removing any linings or other embellishments. A winding sheet (sovev) is laid into the casket. Outside the Land of Israel, if the deceased wore a prayer shawl (tallit) during their life, one is laid in the casket for wrapping the body once it is placed therein. One of the corner fringes (tzitzit) is removed from the shawl to signify that it will no longer be used for prayer and that the person is absolved from having to keep any of themitzvot (commandments).

The body is lifted into the casket and wrapped in the prayer shawl and sheet. Soil (afar) from Israel, if available, is placed over various parts of the body and sprinkled in the casket.

The casket is closed.

After the closing of the casket, the chevra asks forgiveness of the deceased for any inadvertent lack of honor shown to the deceased in the preparation of the body for burial.

There is no viewing of the body and no open casket at the funeral. Sometimes the immediate family pay their final respects before the funeral. In Israel caskets are not used at all, with the exception of military and state funerals. Instead, the body is carried to the grave wrapped in a tallit and placed directly in the earth. In the Diaspora, in general, a casket is only used if required by local law. In the United States, a casket is always required.

From death until burial, it is traditional for guards or watchers (shomrim) to stay with the deceased. It is traditional to recite Psalms (tehillim) during this time.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bereavement_in_Judaism

We will continue to:

- Work with Pastor and the church office to ensure prompt notification to the congregation of a passing within our congregation
- Place a single rose on the altar where we have not assisted the family at a church memorial service

We will continue to assist with a memorial reception which is being held at the church with the following modifications:

- We will offer to assist with a caterer chosen and paid for by the family
- We will offer to have catered food from Publix provided for the reception. The family would reimburse the church entirely for this meal. There will be a choice of 2 menus. One menu will be lighter foods including appetizers. The other meal will provide sandwiches and salads. Our team will work with the family to obtain approximate numbers in attendance and our team will order the meal from Publix and initially pay for it with our Publix credit card.
- In the event a church member does not have the means to pay for catered food our team will provide platters of cheeses, desserts, vegetables, fruits, etc., at no cost to the family
- For all receptions the church will provide the paper products and beverages at no cost to the family as we have at all prior services.

We will provide the following for a church reception whether it has catered food or donated platters:

- Setting up serving tables with coverings
- Placing lacy tablecloths on all tables
- Placing a reserved table sign for the family on the first table
- Preparing beverages: coffee, decaf, tea, water, lemonade or iced tea, creamer, sugars
- Preparation of paper products and silverware
- Setting out the food and assisting throughout the meal
- Ensuring the family is served during the meal
- Clean-up after the reception
- Preparing left-over food for the family to take, or to be used by our church or taken to the food pantry

We will include in our mission statement assistance during a church memorial service which was not included in our original statement but which we have provided in recent services:

- Providing ushers to assist with direction of those in attendance during the service and reception and to hand out bulletins. The head usher may be notified to provide assistance with this if necessary.
- Roping first 2 pews to reserve for the family
- Arranging chairs prior to entry to the church hall for the family to utilize when greeting guests after the service

- Lighting candles for the service
- Setting up a table for memorabilia if desired by the family and assisting them with set up
- Arranging flowers on the altar which have been provided for the service. If no flowers are provided we will utilize a set of the arrangements which have been made for our Sunday services
- Ensuring guests are aware of the guest registry. A podium will be placed at entrance to the sanctuary. The family will be reminded ahead of time to have a registry book. There will be one book purchased and kept at the church office in the event a registry is overlooked ahead of time
- Handle microphones if used during the service
- Providing comfort to the family before and after the service
- Handling the AV system for sound and videos. This must be done only by a church member who has been trained to run our system. Tom Meir will continue to work with this and Liz Cress, Jeff Madsen, Ed Johnson, and Maureen McCoy will be approached by our team to see if they would be willing to also assist with this.

We must ensure that after clean-up the church is properly closed including lock-up and alarm, and heating and air-conditioning system.

The Head Shepherd(s) will be contacted to firm our relationship and shared responsibilities at the time of a loss. If necessary we will modify our mission after this meeting.

This agenda will be presented to the Diaconate and Pastor for approval. We will then ask for additional church members to join our team.

Finally the issue of charging a fee to a church member for use of our facilities during a memorial service was discussed. Every member present stated they felt this was inappropriate and would like to see this policy changed as soon as possible.

The discovery of an ossuary - a box used to hold the bones of a loved one, which was suspected of belonging to Jesus, made a big splash in the news a few years ago.

This ossuary was inscribed with the name of "Yeshua ben Yehosef" – which is Hebrew for "Jesus son of Joseph", along with ossuaries inscribed with such familiar names as "Mary", "Joseph", and others suggesting this was a family tomb.

However, 'Jesus' was as common a name in the 1st Century

as 'John' in our time; For that matter, so was the name 'Judas'.
However, the claim about this ossuary remains a mystery.

Still, this gives light to ancient burial traditions, such that the tomb