

## Accompany Them with Singing

“And now as the coffin of the Queen Mother enters into Windsor’s St. George’s Chapel she passes into the care of the Church...”

And with those words from the BBC commentator, the public funeral rites for Elizabeth, mother of Great Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II, came to an end. The Church has cared for its dead from its very beginning.

On Easter morning it is the women who are going to the tomb to care for the dead, to make final preparation of Jesus’ body. At the tomb the Word emerged that we have been spreading ever since: He is risen, first fruits of the dead! This Jesus has dominion even over death. He has dominion over the future. The world has changed. Over three hundred years went by before anyone cared much about that tomb again because he was not there. He was living in their midst.

Early Christians, awaiting/expecting that same resurrection for their leaders and parents and grandparents often gathered to worship at the tombs of the dead. Breaking bread as Jesus had instructed, now on these sarcophagus-altars, and in some cases, like the apostles’ tombs, building their church-buildings over top of them. But it soon became clear that Jesus was not returning as soon as they expected.

For the next 1,800 years or so the church continued to receive the dead, caring for them in joyful expectation of the resurrection. Burials were made both inside and outside the church. Influential people often found their tombs closer to the altar. Some burials were under the aisles, or above ground in elaborate chapels. Sometimes there was a crypt under the church. The poor were buried outside in the churchyard. By the 1800s in this country the tradition of church burials was being lost except among rural congregations. Our mobile society was less rooted to a specific family church or family plot. Civic cemeteries became more common.

Today, the tradition of church burials is being revived as more and more people are choosing cremation over casket burial. Structures for receiving cremated human remains (columbarium) can be accommodated in church property (indoor or outdoor) that does not have an existing cemetery.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is a columbarium?**

A columbarium is a structure composed of a group of compartments known as “niches” designed to hold cremation urns. Each niche usually accommodates one or two urns. Traditionally each columbarium niche has an individual facing stone made of polished granite.

The columbarium is retained within a wall (a housing structure) that is constructed of building materials complementary to the existing architecture of the church, allowing the project to look as if it is an intended part of the church complex.

### **Why should the church have a columbarium?**

Increasingly cremation is becoming a popular choice of church members as they are faced with providing disposition of their own and loved ones remains. While earth burial still remains a popular option, more and more Christians are moving toward cremation. Current practice among Lutherans appears to be about a 50-50 division between earth burial and cremation. In the future it is expected that a larger percent of Americans will choose cremation over traditional burial. Cremation is also becoming a popular choice among those concerned with protecting treasured natural resources. Because of increasing costs of traditional funerals, those who choose cremation and subsequent entombment within a church columbarium can expect to save over 70% of the cost of an earth burial funeral. The savings will be a bit lower at Redeemer as members receive in-ground plots at no charge.

### **What are the benefits of a church columbarium?**

A columbarium ministry allows the church to fulfill the centuries-old obligation of the church to serve its members from baptism to death. As the rite of baptism welcomes members into the church community, the rite of Christian burial/entombment offers congregants a final homecoming and provides comfort to the living with the knowledge their loved ones are near their spiritual gathering place. This ministry allows Redeemer Lutheran to satisfy the need for Christian burial or entombment, while bringing past and present together – in body and spirit. Those who have come before us remain part of the church community.

### **How can I learn more about the Redeemer Lutheran Columbarium proposal?**

Updated documents about the columbarium will be maintained on the Redeemer Lutheran Church website: [www.redeemerlutheranhenderson.org](http://www.redeemerlutheranhenderson.org) or email the church. If we proceed with the project the church office/cemetery association will provide pricing, availability and entombment agreement forms.

## Christianity and Cremation

Although the practice of cremation has become more common in the last fifty years, some squeamishness remains about whether it is appropriate for Christians. ...Christians need to be reassured that cremation has a history and can be biblically justified.

Both theologically and biblically, it is unnecessary to shun cremation. It has long been said that the Bible argues against cremation on the basis of the story of Saul and his sons, killed in battle and left in the field (1 Samuel 31). The Israelites, at last, retrieved the warriors' remains, burned them, and afterward, buried the bones and observed a seven-day fast. We can interpret their cremation as showing honor to those men. Saul and his sons were shown disrespect when their bodies were left in the open by their enemies, not when the fire consumed their previously neglected flesh. Fire is not inherently irreverent. In fact, fire is often a biblical image of cleansing and purity. The ashes are only a more quickly disintegrated semblance of what a body eventually becomes.

The funeral liturgy is completely appropriate for use with the presence of the body whether it be a corpse or an urn of ashes. [The] ...message of the funeral is to proclaim the resurrection. As to the resurrection, with God nothing is impossible. Whether bones or ashes or nothing visible, in death we will be transformed.

In one of the most sensitive responses to the loss of bodies and ashes in the fall of the World Trade Center towers, some individual or group gathered up dirt from Ground Zero for families left with nothing. [Hundreds of families] ...received a small urn filled with dust from the site. This small urn allowed [these families] to direct their grief and honor toward a symbol of the ashes they might have received. They had something to bury that stood for what they had lost. Even without that little handful of metaphor, they could rightly hold a memorial service: an event of memory for the dead, but because they had been given a strong semblance of the ashes of their [loved one], they could hold a funeral.

"Christianity and Cremation" is an excerpt from: Quivik, Melinda: A Christian Funeral, Witness to the Resurrection, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005; p. 88-89.

## A Columbarium for Redeemer



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