

Christian Faith and Cremation

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The time of death is a difficult time of grief and transition, and the goal of the church is to provide families with pastoral care directed toward healing and hope. Foremost in our minds is that the Christian faith is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the resurrection, God conquered death, the “final enemy,” and gave believers the gift of eternal life. Although grief is real and poignant, we believe that God can point us beyond grief toward hope and ultimate healing. We remember that Jesus said, “Because I live, you shall live also.” Therefore Christ’s resurrection also means that we are given, by grace alone, the gift of abundant life now and eternal life with God after death. John writes in *Revelation* that “we shall see his face,” and we will find our ultimate fulfillment in the presence of the God who loves us.

One facet of this ministry is found in the funeral or memorial service, which is our witness to the resurrection and to the power of God to make all things new. We believe that this witness should never deny the pain and loss, but should celebrate the lives of our loved ones and enable us to express our gratitude for the gift of their lives.

The final disposition of bodily remains signifies our respect for the body of the one we have loved. We also remember the angel’s word to the women at the tomb on Easter morning, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” We commit the body to the grave or the columbarium niche, but, more importantly, we commit our loved one to God.

The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) permits committal by either burial or cremation. Cremation has been practiced for thousands of years. It became more common among Christians in the nineteenth century. Contrary to popular notions about cremation, the body is not burned, but heated so that water evaporates, leaving only the solid matter; thus it simply speeds the natural processes that take place after death. Many people choose cremation as a responsible stewardship decision, since cremation is less expensive and saves land use. In addition, committing remains on the church grounds honors the person’s faith as a baptized member of the household of God.

Since there is little difference between the remains of one who has been buried and one who has been cremated, there are no reasons to favor one over the other from a theological point of view. According to the Bible, at the resurrection we are given a “new body,” which also means that we will still be our own unique, individual selves. The decision whether to bury or cremate is one that should be made with sensitivity toward members of the family and their feelings.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44: *“So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.”*

Whatever methods we may choose, we can be assured that the gift of eternal life is assured to all who believe. We can entrust those we love to the presence and love of God.