

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, May 22, 2022**

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

**Festal Evensong to Honor all Involved in the Funeral Industry**

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

*on*

Isaiah 38:9-20; John 12:1-8

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## **In Praise of Funeral Homes**

We live in an age when many funeral customs have all but disappeared in so many societies. Gone are the days of washing and preparing the body for burial or cremation; dressing the body; bringing the deceased home; gathering with the body and telling stories; and even feasting around the deceased. There is a wonderful film from many years ago, set in the North of England, that has a scene that I will never forget. A man has died suddenly, and his wake is being held at the local pub. In the courtyard, his widow is sitting with the young priest making her confession; it is a poignant scene. Then, suddenly, you notice some movement and behind them, through the window of the pub, you spy the open coffin placed not on a catafalque, but on the pub's pool table, and the friends of the deceased dancing the conga around it!

As a young priest myself in the East End of London, I experienced some of those old traditions – well, not actually dancing a conga around a coffin - but the need for the family and friends to participate in the funeral rituals. Many a time I would visit a family that had been bereaved, not knowing what I would encounter, and sit around the kitchen table having a cup of tea or something stronger as the family told me story after story of the dead person's life. And then, as natural as it had been to sit me down and chat, they would say “Do you want to see him ‘Farve?’” And we would go into the best room of the house where the casket was waiting and we would chat, and pray, and the family would laugh and cry at the same time, and brush the hair of the one whom they loved who had died. And it all seemed so very natural.

Over the past 37 years, I have had the privilege of working with some amazing funeral homes in Essex, London, Devon, and now New York. I have stood with the funeral director and watched the Fire Department of New York's funeral procession slowly and solemnly make its way down Fifth Avenue; I have stood alongside a Tamil family holding candles as the congregation filed past to fill the coffin with flower petals; I have led the way into the funeral chapel as the Funeral Director escorted the wife of the deceased, with his previous three wives, and his current mistress; together, we have placed the tiny white coffin containing the little baby so longed for into the arms of the sobbing father so that he could honor his only child this one last time. I could go on and on, but every time, it has been a partnership with the funeral director and his or her staff that has also helped me with the enormity of such grief.

Those who are involved in the funeral industry know all about that kind of encounter which is why, I suppose, clergy and funeral directors and their staff have a peculiar bond and, let's be honest, a good sense of humor! The dignity afforded the dead is something ancient; stretching across millennia, funeral directors and religious leaders have worked together to honor the dead, prepare them for burial or cremation, and support the families who are grieving. And since March 2020, that work has been exceptionally demanding with now over 1 million deaths due to Covid-19 in the United States alone. Over

the past 26 months, we have regularly and rightly honored those who have worked tirelessly in the medical profession – our doctors, our nurses, our first responders, our ambulance drivers. In the early days of the pandemic, we banged our saucepans leaning out of windows, blew our whistles, clapped and cheered, and even rang our church bells. Meanwhile, quietly, and with great dignity, our funeral homes were honoring the dead, not even knowing what this virus was; the rising death toll stretched your capabilities and yet, you never flinched from your responsibilities and even with extraordinary restrictions, the dead were treated with respect and families supported. For that, we salute you today and thank you.

Funeral rituals are natural and cathartic; they help us grieve by our participation in them, and clergy and funeral homes work together to help that grieving process. Why? Because remembering is part of being human; and even the little rituals surrounding death are part of that remembering. However, Bishop Richard Holloway suggests that we do more than just remember; in our acts of remembrance, for example, we could actually be called **remembrancers** for we *participate* in the memory. He says: “*We would be remembrancers even if we lived for ever, but it seems to be the presence of death that provokes the keenest remembrance. The living we can revisit, but the dead we can only remember. And we do: sometimes in little glimpses, like the credit flashbacks at the end of a film; sometimes in more elaborate sequences, in which we reconstitute as much about a person as we can. It is death that makes us look back in sorrow, makes us remembrancers. But it is also death that makes us look forward in dread.*”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s second lesson, Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha took an extraordinarily expensive jar of perfume and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. Now, this would have been a scandalous gesture 2000 years ago and indeed, would certainly raise eyebrows even today; it evoked a strong reaction from some of the men in the room. The reaction of Jesus is very poignant; “*Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.*” Did Jesus know that he would be denied the usual funeral rituals? When his body was taken down from the cross, Joseph of Arimathea became an impromptu funeral director and wrapped the body in a clean linen shroud and laid it in a tomb freshly hewn in the rock, and rolled a great stone over the entrance to the tomb. But the Gospels tell us that, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the tomb carrying spices. They were not satisfied – they had been denied their part in the funeral of Jesus. They were not only remembering their Lord, they wanted to play their part and wash and anoint the body – they wanted to be *remembrancers*.

In the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard earlier in our service, there is a beautiful image of a person’s life journey described as a tapestry or carpet. As you know, when a carpet or tapestry is being woven, as it grows in size it becomes impossible to carry on without rolling it up, and the roll becomes bigger and bigger and the pattern becomes obscured. It is only when the rug or tapestry is complete that the weaver cuts it off from the loom and unrolls it. Isaiah says, “*like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom.*” (Isaiah 38:12) This process of being cut off from the loom in which the rug was made is a process of separation; it is necessary in order for the rug to be of any use. But the most beautiful thing of all is the unrolling of the carpet and then, and only then, can the beautiful pattern be revealed for all to see, including all its unique imperfections. Our lives are like that, says Isaiah, and when we are cut off from the loom of life, then our story will be fully revealed.

As funeral directors and staff, you help with the unrolling of the tapestry of a person’s life, as it were, enabling the story to be told, to be celebrated, to be grieved, to be cherished.

You help us become remembrancers.

Let me end with one of my favorite poems that expresses this theme.

Long Distance II by the Yorkshire Poet, Tony Harrison:

Though my mother was already two years dead  
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,  
put hot water bottles her side of the bed  
and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.  
He'd put you off an hour to give him time  
to clear away her things and look alone  
as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief  
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key  
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.  
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.  
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,  
in my new black leather phone book there's your  
name and the disconnected number I still call.

<sup>1</sup>. From *'Anger, Sex, Doubt, and Death'* pub. SPCK 1992