

## CHRISTIAN FUNERAL OF MARTHA PITTS

### Revelation 1:9-18

People die. People die, and we paint them up, put them in a box, trade platitudes and niceties, and lower them into a hole. People die. Most everyone agrees on that, and if you have doubts, the proof is beneath the pall today. People die. That's a given. Its what comes before and after that gets debated.

Many theories have developed over the years about what comes next, if anything, and how that effects the here and now, the time before the grave. The world is full of answers to such questions, but, unfortunately, there's a lot of red on its quiz, because the answer cannot come from this world, the answer cannot come from this side of the grave. That would be bad science. No, the answer must be revealed from beyond, by One who has experienced life, death, and what follows. Pile up as many brights or gurus or philosophers as you'd like, but the fact remains that all of them are speculating, all of them are talking about something they couldn't possibly know, because mysteries can't be tested; mysteries can only be revealed.

People die. I've seen them do it—more than I could count on my hands and yours. And I'm going to go out on a limb here and say most, if not all, of you gathered here today are people. People die. So what do we do?

Many would say that's where religion comes in, our Tooth Fairy, our Santa Claus, our Easter Bunny, our crutch, and happy pill. And much religion may be just that, but not Christianity. Christianity doesn't chase death out of our mind or explain it away. No, Christianity places death front and center and calls it what it is: horrible—just look at the crucifix. Jesus doesn't offer placeboes and platitudes, sugar cubes and smiles. No, Jesus tells His disciples, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* Yes, confronted with death, Jesus Himself weeps. He wept at the death of Lazarus, even as He was about to raise Him. He wept in Gethsemane as He prepared for His own death. Why? Because we were not made to die. We were created to live forever. Death is not natural. Death is a tragedy. Death is the fall into sin played over and over again, the sad song of paradise lost stuck on repeat.

People die. We are people, so take a good look at that box, because you're going to take a ride in one someday, and you'd best be ready, because whether

or not you've come up with your own answer, adopted someone else's, or plainly refused to ask the question, its all going to boil down to one issue when you breathe your last: what's next?

Plenty of people have tried to argue others to faith over the centuries. Plenty have tried to reason them. One of the most interesting arguments was made by Blaise Pascal, a French philosopher and a Christian apologist of sorts. He applied decision theory to the issue of belief in God. Basically, he put it like this: if the Christian is wrong, dead is dead and he or she has lost nothing—yes, perhaps the Christian avoided certain pleasures as a result of his or her faith, but, on the whole, odds are faith actually made life more meaningful—but the unbeliever, if he or she is wrong, if there is a heaven and a hell, the unbeliever loses everything. Reason would say, then, Pascal contended, that the reasonable thing is to believe in God.

It's a nice argument, but its no good, not because the logic is bad, but because God doesn't want our bet. He doesn't work at the race track. God wants faith, and belief in God is not something we can click our fingers and decide to have, belief in God is not a function of our will or reason, although it takes both captive and then slowly makes them whole as God intended them to be. No, faith is, as St. Paul makes clear, the gift of God. Faith is what God gives us. Faith is what we receive from Christ so that through faith we can receive all the blessings of His life, death, and resurrection freely and for free. And to make sure that we don't mess it up, God hasn't left it up to us to produce it, but rather works it in us Himself through the Holy Scriptures and blessed Sacraments.

Jesus appeared to St. John in our lesson today. He appeared in all His glory, as true God and true man, dressed in all the splendor of heaven and bearing the instruments of the King and Judge of all. St. John, who had walked and talked and ate and lived with Jesus for three years fell on his face in terror, as though dead, unable to bear the sight of the Almighty. And who of us wouldn't, who of us shouldn't do the same? But what a tragedy it would be if we stopped at that point in the lesson, if we didn't pay attention to what came next. John writes, *"But he laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.'"*

Here is the authority. Here is the one who has been there and done that, who has seen it all. Here is the One who does not speculate, but reveals. Here is, not an answer, but the answer. Here is Jesus Christ our Lord who has

destroyed death by His death and brought life and immortality to light. And what does He say to St. John, and to all of us faced with the grim prospect of death today? *“Fear not.”* And that is the gospel. That is the good news. Christians die the same as everyone else, but Christians need not fear death. Sure, Christians may fear how they will die—no one wants to burn, or drown, or be eaten by prairie dogs—but for the Christian death itself has lost its teeth. Its not the end. No, it is the door to the beginning, to a real paradise, to a legitimate heaven.

People die, and to those preparing to do so, Christ stretches out His hand pierced for our transgressions and rests it on their shoulders, even as our cross rested on His, and says, *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—never trust a German philosopher by the way—famously said, “God is dead.” No, God was dead, but He is now very much alive and kicking. He did die, because people die, and our God became man to save us from death, to turn this day from a remembrance and farewell to a “see you again,” but the grave could not hold Him. *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*

There’s a lot we could recall about Martha Pitts, things endearing and annoying, appealing and frustrating, but that won’t help with the whole matter of what really happened here: death. No, we do much better to recall the one thing that really mattered Sunday afternoon: the truth that she was not only our mother, grandmother, aunt, or friend, but, more importantly, our sister in Christ, a member of His Body, the Church, and if there is one thing we know about the Body of Christ, it is that it doesn’t stay in the grave long, it doesn’t stay dead.

He who was lifted up to cast off our sin and to draw us to Himself has placed His pierced hand upon our departed sister and lifted her up. Paradise is no longer lost for her. No, paradise is found. Grandpa might have given her quite the light show every Christmas when she got on his nerves—and no, I’m not going to explain that now—but now she basks in light we can only imagine, the light that not only sheds light on the darkness away, but banishes it.

Martha Pitts didn’t make a deal with God. She didn’t set terms for when she would listen. She didn’t tell Him what to bring to the table before they could do business. After all, if you want a God who fits in your head, you don’t want a big enough God. No, when she was here in His house, she was about His

business, she did what the faithful do: she humbly listened, she opened her mouth, not to speak, but to receive the life-giving Body and Blood of the First and the Last, the medicine of immortality. She met God where He was at, and, in that, she got the best deal of all, in the most beneficial terms of all, so that she now sits at the most important table of all at the eternal feast of the Lamb.

People die. Its sad but true, but there is nothing sad about death today. No, Martha knew the answer. He who also died but now lives and reigns for ever made sure of that, and He says to you today the same thing He said to her, and He says it as the authority on the matter, *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”* Amen.