

Jesus is risen! Jesus is coming! Amen.

What do you say at a funeral? Wow! That's a heavy start. But it's a very practical question, isn't it? Funerals are so awkward, so sad, so somber. You don't want to seem uncaring and say nothing. You don't want to be insensitive and say the wrong thing. What do you say at a funeral? Someone asked this question at our Vine and Branches group a couple weeks ago. Vine and Branches is our ministry of small group Bible study. I promised an answer to the question, "What do you say at a funeral?" Actually, God gives us the answer right here. What do you say? Jesus is risen! Jesus is coming! Those are encouraging words. Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming. They are probably the best words of encouragement ever spoken. Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming. Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming.

God wants us to know what to say. He doesn't want us to be ignorant. And he calls us brothers. Brothers. We are part of God's holy family. Brothers. This word only applies to believers. These encouraging words are for believers only. Certainly Jesus rose whether or not you believe it. Jesus is coming whether you are a Christian or not. But the words of encouragement, "Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming," are for believers only.

Because you see for believers in Jesus death is just a sleep. Now those who fall asleep is not a euphemism to avoid the naughty d word of death. I know we have plenty of those. Passed away. Went to a better place. And here's the most creative euphemism I've ever heard. I was meeting with my parents and their financial planner. My parents wanted to make sure they would have enough money in retirement. When they look at the projections, it always shows my dad dying first because men usually do. But the financial planner didn't want to say, "death," so when the projections showed my dad dying, the financial planner would say, "Now you can see here, when Bill successfully completes his retirement." Whew. That's a lot of words to avoid one word. But sleep is not this type of euphemism. Think about sleep and we can see why God uses this as a positive word for death. Sleep is temporary. So physical death is temporary for the believer. Jesus is risen, so your believing grandmother is risen! Sleep is a state that's easy to change, as long as you remember to set your alarm clock. So physical death is so easy for God to change. He just calls your name. And you wake up, and spend a perfect eternity with him in heaven. Sleep is something we look forward to. I was talking to a couple retired friends of mine and they said, "We love being retired. We take a nap every day." That's the good life! Sleep when you want! So it's weird to say, but the believer looks forward to death. Physical death means I get to go to heaven. Physical death means I get to be with Jesus. Jesus is risen. So I will rise. Sleep is a time of calm and peace. At my physical death, I will finally be at peace. I don't think my dad's standard for a successful retirement is to die. But I know my dad's standard for a successful life is to die and be with Jesus. And I'm certain that's where my dad will be. Because Jesus is risen. my dad who believes in Jesus will be risen!

I know this is emotional stuff we are talking about. Funerals. My dad's still alive, but thinking about his death brings tears to my eyes. Thinking about him being with Jesus brings more tears to my eyes. But tears of a different kind. It's ok to grieve at a funeral. It's ok to be sad, even when it's a believer. That Christian helped you stay close to Jesus. That believer encouraged you with the words, "Jesus is risen!" God doesn't tell us, "Don't grieve! Don't be sad!" Instead he tells us, "Don't grieve like the rest of people

who have no hope.” We could talk a long time about the hopeless view of life after death that existed in the world at that time. A gloomy underworld, filled with frightening tales of horrifying creatures. No wonder no one wanted to talk about death. That’s not so much today. The rest of people today often just deny anything after death. You die and it’s over. Well, isn’t that equally hopeless? You die and it’s over? You live what 80, maybe 90 years on this world, when every day the news has more murders and hurricanes, and your life is doctor appointments and hospitals and funerals. And this is all you’ve got? And yet, we so often live and grieve like those who have no hope. Does your day start with this thought, “Today could be my last day on this earth and that would be the best day of my life?” Or does the day just start with a yawn, a grumble and a complaint about all there is to do and there’s not time and energy to do it all? If someone followed you around all day, what would they notice is different? Does even your best friend know how much Jesus means to you? Where is your mind at funeral? Wondering? Did she really go to a better place? Is Jesus real? Does it really matter to be a believer? Did Jesus really rise? Do I really have something to say, standing by the casket, shaking the hand of the widower with tears in his eyes, hugging the lady who lost the only man she ever loved? Will anything matter? Will any words change anything? What are the magic words to make the tears go away?

These words aren’t magic, but they are encouragement. Jesus is risen! Jesus is risen! Jesus is risen! Jesus is risen! I know it looks so final when you are staring into that casket. It looked that final when they placed Jesus in the tomb. But Jesus rose! Jesus is risen! Jesus didn’t stay dead. Jesus couldn’t stay dead. When you stare into that casket, just say, “Jesus is risen!” So my grandmother who died believing in Jesus is risen, too. My Christian husband really is in a better place. The best place: heaven. With his best friend of all time: Jesus. Jesus is risen! Talk about hope! Jesus is risen! Talk about encouragement! Jesus is risen! Talk about the best words to say at a funeral!

And talk about the best words to say on earth. You might know that one of the things I get to do is visit those who are in the hospital. You might think that’s kind of scary and sad. Actually, it’s just the opposite. Not only is it beyond words cool that pastor is one of the first people who gets a phone call, but here’s the stuff I get to hear. True story. Lady in her 70s falls. Breaks several bones. The occupational therapist is working to massage her arm and broken shoulder. They get to talking about being old and how there’s no other alternative, well at least the therapist says, “The alternative to getting old is much worse.” But the Christian lady in the bed, the injured one, whose face has a nasty grimace of pain I haven’t ever seen, says right away, “I’m not afraid to die. I know Jesus is waiting for me.” The alternative to getting old is actually better, for the believer. The alternative is to be with Jesus. Because Jesus is risen, you will rise. There’s encouraging words. Jesus is risen. And there’s more encouraging words, “Jesus is coming.” Remember our six encouraging words, “Jesus is risen! Jesus is coming!”

This is the Lord’s own word. I know all the Bible is God’s Word, but God wants us especially to know that these words are the Lord’s own words. Jesus is coming. And those who are alive when he comes will certainly not in any way precede or go before those who already are asleep in Jesus, resting in peace. No! The Lord’s coming will be a face to face, wonderful, beyond awesome experience.

The Lord himself will come down from heaven. Nobody will miss him. Jesus is coming! All will hear it. Jesus is coming! There’s a loud and vocal command, the voice of the chief angel, the trumpet call of God. There are many special words here, many words that are used only in this section of the Bible. That’s how special the coming of Jesus is. It takes special words to describe it. That’s how encouraging these words are. Jesus is coming!

Now notice, the Bible isn't answering every question of the sequence. The Bible here isn't talking about what happens to unbelievers. Remember we heard brothers and sisters at the beginning of these verses. God is talking about what happens to believers. God is telling us so that we have hope and encouragement. The dead in Christ will rise. And they won't rise to the same, stinking, sin-filled earth. They will rise to perfection. To heaven. To Jesus. You know, I understand what people mean when they say, "This medicine saved my life." Ok, it means, "I would have died without this medicine." But last I checked, aren't you just going to die of something else? Didn't the medicine just extend your time on this earth? Only Jesus can save your life, eternally. Only Jesus can promise you a perfect life in heaven. Rising with Jesus doesn't just mean more time on this earth. Rising with Jesus means eternity in heaven. That's real saving. That's real encouragement.

We will be caught up together, with other believers in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. This word for, "meet," is another one of these special words. It was used when a public welcome was given to important guests upon their arrival in a city. I like to think of the black tie event, at which the butler stands at the door and says, "Mr. Edward Nottingham from Chesire has arrived." And the crowd breaks into applause. Maybe you think more of the red carpet at the Grammys. And the flashbulbs are popping and the phones are recording and everyone is so excited to see who's coming next. That's your welcome into heaven. You will be wearing the prettiest dress of Jesus' perfection. You will be rocking the tux of righteousness. And Jesus calls your name. And he gives you a big hug. And he says, "Our distinguished guest has arrived." And Jesus isn't just the heavenly bouncer who pulls back the rope and lets you in to find your own way. Jesus takes you to the VIP table. Jesus sits down with you. And stays with you. And the food is all on him. And you never get fat. And he picks up the tab for all eternity. And he never, ever leaves your side.

That sentence, "And so we will be with the Lord forever." That's a really, really cool sentence. I'd put that right up there with our six words of encouragement, "Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming," as words to memorize. We will be with the Lord forever. But when I studied these words, they got even cooler, if it's possible to be more cool than to be with the Lord forever. But here's how. The word forever literally means at all times. At all times and forever. In heaven, it's not just being with Jesus for a while now and then a while down the road and then a while later. It's at all times. All times. And forever. We will be with the Lord at all times and forever.

So I pray I answered, or better yet, God answered our opening question. What do you say at a funeral? At the funeral of a believer, God told us exactly what to say, "Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming." What could give more hope than, "Jesus is risen! Jesus is coming"? What could be more encouraging than, "Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming"? Say it with confidence the next time you attend the funeral of believer. "Jesus is risen. Jesus is coming." Can we all say those words together? "Jesus is risen! Jesus is coming!" Amen.

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