

Some burial customs in the United States comfort the bereaved by helping them not think too much about death. When an American dies, we usually dress up, make up and lay out the body so it looks like the person has just gone to sleep. This has the advantage of giving us a peaceful, final view of the one we loved, a memory we can carry with us for the rest of our lives. On the other hand, it is part of a series of customs that separate us from the reality of death and could make it harder to accept someone's death when it happens.

At the cemetery, for example, if the body is to be buried, the graveside crew has dug a hole and raised a tall pile of dirt. But you'd never know it, because they cover up the hole beneath the casket and conceal the pile of dirt with a green carpet. We go to the cemetery for a burial, but the workers have hidden all the evidence that it will take place. The body is usually buried after the mourners have left. We last view the casket while it is still above ground.

The Catholic funeral rite actually recommends that the casket be lowered into the ground during the prayers at the cemetery as a sign that our faith is stronger than the grave. We are invited to escort the one we love all the way into the ground. But many families can't bear to watch, and if they can, many funeral directors don't want to arrange it, and even if they are willing, many clergy are not. It is a struggle sometimes to invite mourners to remain for the actual burial. People in our society want material things, all of which we lose when we die. It is hard for us to look into the face of death.

Even Jesus had a hard time with death. According to the Letter to the Hebrews, "he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death." The Jesus of the Letter to the Hebrews is not confident as he faces the cross. He is scared to death.

But, the Letter continues, because he was obedient in his suffering, he became our high priest, and as our high priest, he saves all those who are obedient to him. Our faith in Christ gives us faith at death.

On Good Friday we commemorate the passion and death of our savior. We also come face to face with everything that troubles us in life: our sins, our shortcomings and our fears. Jesus knew every temptation that we know, and he knew all our fears. He has repositioned our fears by his cross.