

OK, imagine you're a family in the year 50 AD living in Greece. (This is the country not like living in grease before you clean the kitchen.) All your life you've been offering sacrifices to Zeus and Hera, appealing to the likes of Apollo and Diana, when a preacher named Paul blows into town from Tarsus. He tells you that Jesus of Nazareth, a preacher and wonder-worker, was crucified but rose from the dead. He's coming back again, and he promises eternal life for all who follow him. Sounds like a good deal to you. So you get baptized. Then Paul leaves town; goes to Corinth. You get to thinking, wait a minute, if Jesus is coming to rescue me from this world, what about those Christians who are dying before he gets here? Have they missed out on eternal life because Jesus seems to be taking one of those discount air tickets? So you get a few friends together, get up a few questions, and send them off to Paul, half wondering if he was like last month's guy in the chequered suit who sold snake oil. Paul got the message in Corinth, sat down, and fired off a letter to the Thessalonians. Today's second reading is taken from the first book ever written for the New Testament. The reason we have it is that the first Christians got a little scared about death. We usually remember the bravery of the martyrs; well, not everybody was so cocksure.

Today we comfort mourners through funeral rites which express our faith. We believe that baptism begins the life of Christ which we'll enter fully when we die. At our funerals we use symbols of baptism--holy water to recall the sacrament, a white cloth over the casket to recall our baptismal garment, and the Easter candle from which we light our baptismal candle. When Catholics plan a wake service, they usually imagine a rosary, but our church encourages us to plan a scripture service in which we hear passages like these we proclaim today. The wake service does not have to take place in the funeral home; we can all gather at church if you like. Some people don't want a funeral Mass; maybe the deceased didn't go to church very often, or they just want something simple. But a full mass is preferred; the eucharist is the most perfect way to celebrate the presence of Christ and our hope for eternal life. At the cemetery, you may remain present for lowering the casket into the ground. We escort the one we love all the way to the grave, and stand upon the earth in faith, like farmers planting a seed. It used to be that the Catholic Church did not permit cremation; we do now. Several members of our parish have chosen cremation, and we've celebrated their funerals here beautifully. Although some people prefer to put ashes on the mantle, bury them in the garden, or fling them into the air, placing them at a public mausoleum helps all the mourners grieve for generations to come.

St. Paul's letter informed the Thessalonians that it makes no difference who has died and who's alive when Jesus comes again. All of us will meet Christ together. We believe that God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will also raise us from the dead. At our funerals, we console one another with that faith.