



## A Christian Ending to Our Life...

People come from all over the world to the hospital I work for in order to receive a miracle. More often than not, these patients and their families have exhausted all other options of treatment and they find themselves, of all places, in Cleveland, Ohio. Some patients get their miracle. Others do not.

As a hospital chaplain death comes as daily as the bread we ask God to give us. I used to believe that death was what happened when medicine failed. Most of the medical professionals I work with personalize this idea: Death, says the doctor, is what happens when *I* fail. Also in this line of thinking, death is what happens when *God* fails. Death drives us to have our chests cracked open, our throats intubated, and our nerves blocked so that we can have five or ten or twenty more years with the things we love. My time as a hospital chaplain has helped me no longer to think of life and death in this way. As Christians, we believe that the Author of Life is revealed to be God while hanging dead on the Cross. On Pascha morning, we celebrate the fact that the tomb is no longer a place for decaying flesh but is now the bridal-chamber where God consummates His love for Humanity. I heard these truths proclaimed in church since I was young, but it wasn't until I got to know death personally that I finally learned them by experience.



I was asleep in the on-call room one night when the pager went off. Chaplain interns and residents in my department rotate these midnight-8AM shifts on a weekly basis where we are the only chaplains on-site and are primarily responsible for responding to deaths. After getting dressed in the dark I called the nurse of the unit that paged me and learned that a woman—a fifty-four year old mother of two—had died. I tied my tie, put on my ID badge, and walked to the Palliative Care unit where she had spent her last days. What



greeted me was pandemonium. Outside the room several family members wept loudly. Children—nieces and nephews and children of the dead woman—cried in the lounge. In the center of it all was the woman's mother who looked at me blankly when I introduced myself and asked, over the body of her daughter, "Why did this happen? How could God let her die?" I didn't then and I still don't have an answer for her. I held her, I cried with her, and an hour later I left the unit and the grieving family to collapse on my bed. I couldn't fall back asleep but instead asked God the same question: Why? There was nothing painless, blameless, or peaceful about her passing. For her and her family death was not some mystical union with the divine—it was blasphemous separation from those she loved.

The next day I found myself in a room of a patient on one of my cardio-vascular units. The man in the bed had had a heart attack and stroke, a machine was pressing air into his body through a tube in his throat, and his wife of fifty-nine years as well as his adult daughter were watching on. The chance for physical recovery was hopeless and a nurse was beginning to withdraw the technology that was keeping him alive. As the man was a retired church organist who was always involved in the life of his community, his family wanted a chaplain to be there with him in his final moments. After leading the two in prayer, and watching with tears in my eyes as this woman kissed her husband for the last time, the tubes came out and we waited with him as his breathing slowed and his heart stopped. In those twenty minutes, I listened as they remembered stories of his life and I was present with them as the man who had loved them for decades painlessly, blamelessly, and peacefully passed away. The moment continues to be one of the holiest and most beautiful things I have ever experienced.

I walked out of the hospital after coming downstairs from the man's death. Nothing about the outside world had changed in the twenty-four hours since I had met the woman who had lost her daughter and the mother of her grandchildren. I had recently come from meeting the world's newest widow, and I knew that God was present in every breath of cold air I was taking in. Death, I finally learned, is an objective fact of life. It is our reaction to death, which is often decided by the manner in which a loved one dies, that either draws us closer to or drives us further from God. We ask for a painless, blameless, and peaceful death, not because it is the "Christian" way to die—as if Jews or Muslims or atheists don't want such a death—but because it is so much easier to see God's providence in the ending of a long life well-lived, than it is to discern His will in the death of a child or a young mother. And this is why Christ had to die in the way that He did. In the Old Testament it is a sign of divine favor to die surrounded by loved ones after many years of prosperity. To be condemned by an occupying force and hung on a cross while your mother and friend watch is as senseless and blasphemous as dying on the Pediatric unit, or dying when you have not yet seen your son finish high school. Christ came so that *every* death—including the painful, blameful, and peaceless—may be as revelatory of the Kingdom of God as Isaac's. So while we pray for a death that is free of pain, we also know that a death in a Roman arena eaten by animals like St. Ignatius or in a mine shaft like Saint Elizabeth the New Martyr, can be as holy as being kissed by your spouse before passing quietly in your bed. These are all Christian endings, and all of them are painless, blameless, and peaceful in the light of the Resurrection.

Source: [Wonder](#)