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Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion

Senior Palliative Care Chaplain, Massachusetts General Hospital Division of Palliative Care

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## TODAY WE WILL LET GOD LOVE US FULLY.

*A friend came in one day to visit a retired bishop who was in a home for terminal cancer patients. “How are you doing?” he asked. The bishop replied, “I’m just sitting here letting God love me.” Why not do the same as you grieve? Just sit there in God’s presence and let God love you as you grieve. Is He not closer to you than the air you breathe? And who loves you more than God? And do you not belong to Him by right of creation as well as by right of redemption? Let God love you.*

*Let God grieve with you. – Fr. Anthony Coniaris*



## WHY DOES THIS MATTER?



Icon: Anna Poloz

- Grieving is one of the ways we become fully human.
- It is a gift from God that we must actively receive.
- Grieving “well” honors both the body and the soul, reinforcing our incarnational life.
- As we pursue our full humanity in Christ, with vulnerability and humility, we grow closer to God, the true Source of life.
- Unprocessed grief can hurt you.

# GOD IS WITH US!

*John's Story:*

*We know each other at  
the foot of the cross.*



# SUFFERING AND HEALING HAPPEN WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST



# SUFFERING AND GRIEF CAN CHALLENGE...



Our own faith  
AND/OR  
the faith of those  
we care for  
(friends, patients,  
clients, family)



BUT...IS IT OKAY TO GRIEVE?  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO  
GRIEVE WITH HOPE?



“But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

(1 Thess. 4:13-14)

What is our Orthodox Christian framework for understanding suffering and grief (broadly defined)?

Is God in control?

Is God punishing me?

Does God love me?

Why is my life not going according to my plan?

How could God let this happen?

Do good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people...?





What happens when our faith is challenged by grief?

Emotional: tears, anger, numbness

Physical: pain, lethargy, exhaustion

Intellectual: “Turns out I was wrong this whole time. God doesn’t love me and God doesn’t have a plan for me.”

Spiritual: “I was a good person. What kind of God would do this?”

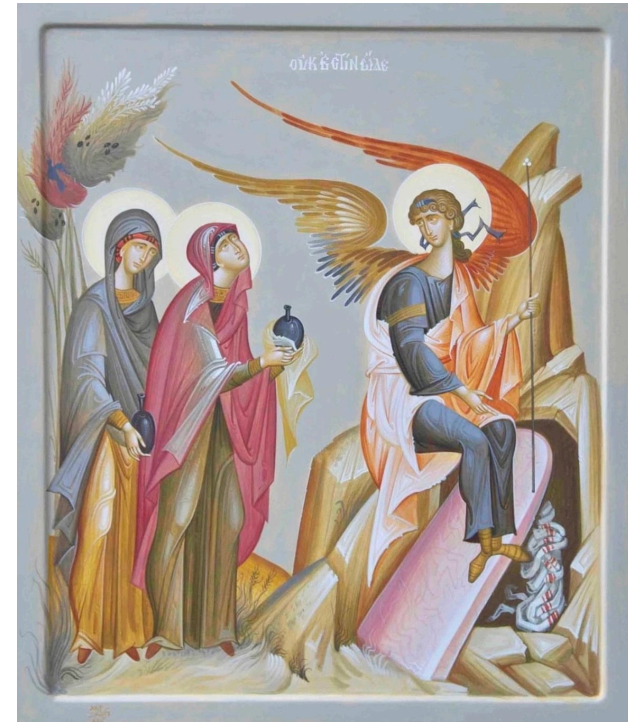
Questioning everything you know.  
Confusion, re-organizing your life,  
secondary losses.

Grief is the LOSS of an IMAGINED  
FUTURE.



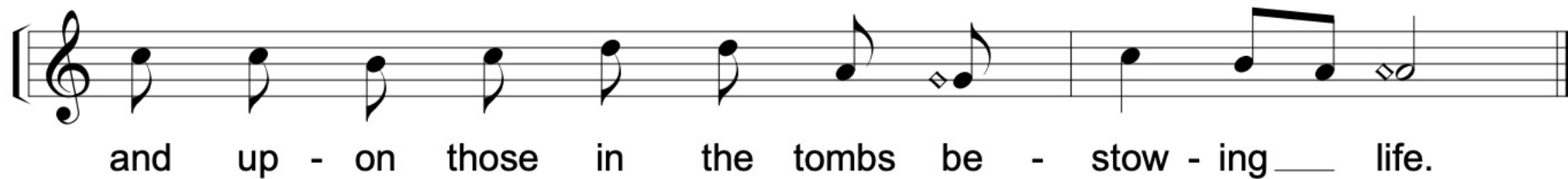
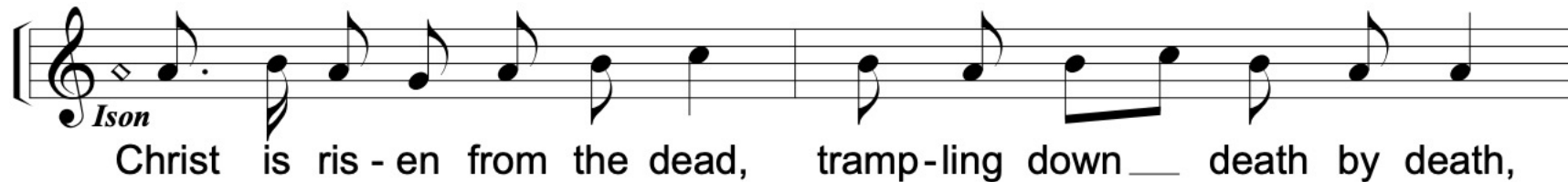
## HOW DO WE VIEW DEATH?

- To be prayed for? To be feared? To be defeated?
- “A Christian ending to our lives: painless, blameless, peaceful, and a good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ”
- Fr Alexander Schmemmann: death was “not created by God... it is not, in the emphatic sense of the word, a ‘natural’ event.” It is a tragedy on the deepest level, for God created us “not that we should die, but in order that we should live.” (*Liturgy of Death*)
- St Paul, “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.” (1 Cor 15:25-26)



## HOW DO WE VIEW DEATH?

- Death is a tragedy, and yet it is a blessing from the Lord; it is “nonetheless His gift, an expression of His mercy and compassion.” (*Liturgy of Death*)



# DEATH IS...

Tragedy: an  
“ontological  
catastrophe”  
worthy of lament

Hope: the  
“dawn of the  
mystical day”



Victory:  
Christ has  
trampled  
down by  
death



# GRIEF WITHIN SCRIPTURE

- Christ's grief for Lazarus: "Jesus wept." "See how He loved him!"
- Christ's followers, and notably his mother Mary, stood vigil at the cross as He died. (Jn 19:25)
- Mary Magdalene "stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'" (Jn 20:11-13) She was tasked with sharing the good news of resurrection with the world.
- The death of the first Christian martyr: "Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentations over him." (Acts 8:2)



# GRIEF WITHIN THE LITURGY

- How to lament openly
- How to hold joy and sorrow together in prayer
- How to show up, stay present, and keep vigil
- How to journey through pain and suffering
- That Christ is in our midst!



WE LAMENT WITH THE MOTHER OF GOD.





“But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Thess. 4:13-14)

What does it mean not to “grieve as others do, who have no hope?”

Be like the Myrrhbearing Women.





MEMORY ETERNAL  
BEREAVEMENT GROUP CURRICULUM:  
WEEKLY THEME AND ACTIVITY

Week 1: Lamenting Your Loss / *Letter to Self*

Week 2: Healing Found in Prayer and Liturgy / *Pray Every Day*

Week 3: Your Community / *Reach Out to a Friend*

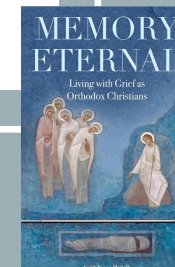
Week 4: Memory Eternal / *Remembrance Box*

Week 5: Continuing Bonds / *Letter to Your Loved One*

Week 6: Holistic Self-Care / *Writing a Self-Care Plan*

Week 7: How Grief Can Challenge Our Faith / *Act of Kindness*

Week 8: Bright Sadness / *Say Their Names*



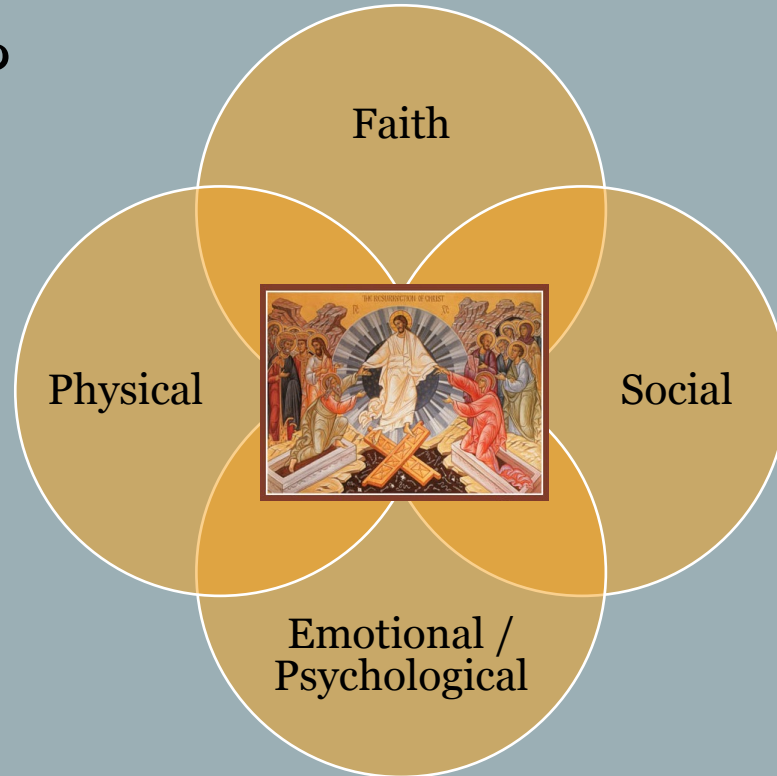
# SELF-CARE DOMAINS (AKA, NOT JUST BUBBLE BATHS WITH A GLASS OF WINE)

Your faith practice?

- Fasting
- Prayer
- Sacraments

Your health?

- Exercise
- Sleep
- Eating

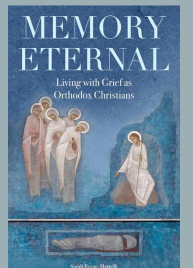


Your social life?

- Friends
- Fun activities
- Hobbies

Your emotional life?

- Therapy
- Reflection time
- Your mood



## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

Listen without judgment, interruption, or advice.

Do not compare losses.

Don't ask a widower if he will remarry or a newly bereaved parent if he or she will have another child.

Do not literally throw yourself into the arms of a grieving person.

Do not force yourself to have an upbeat tone or cheer them up.

A touch on the shoulder and compassionate silence are most helpful.

If you live far away, send a letter or a gift card for food delivery.

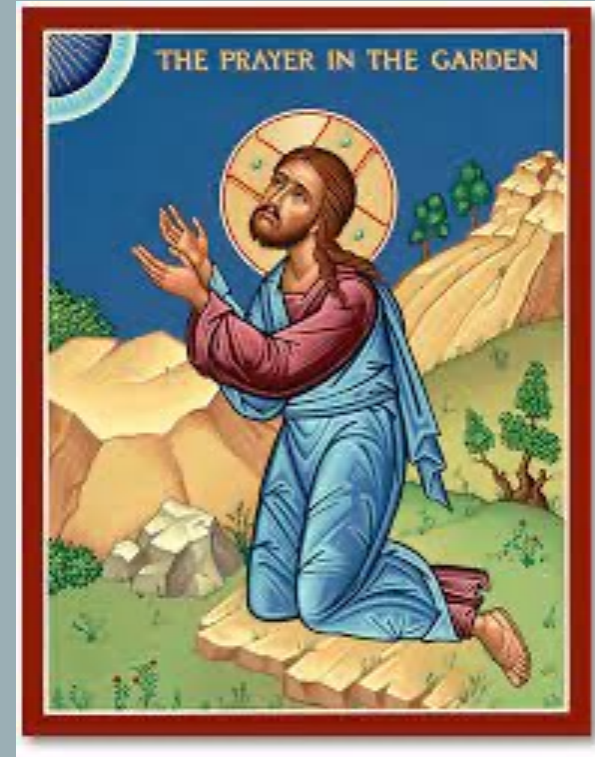
Remember dates: anniversaries, birthdays, special events.

# PRAY FOR THEM.

## Maria's Story

*Phil 4:6-7: Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Do we turn to God in prayer?



## PRACTICAL TIPS: SHIFT RESPONSE VERSUS SUPPORT RESPONSE

“I’m having a really hard time at work.”

Shift Response: Really? Yeah, my boss is the worst! Wait till you hear what he said to me...

Support Response: Really? What’s going on?

“My husband and I are having a hard time.”

Shift: Well, at least you have a husband. I’m sure you’ll be fine.

Support: I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?

“I feel so lost without my mother.”

Shift: I know exactly what you’re going through. I lost my dog.

Support: She was very special. What do you miss most about her?

## “SPIRITUAL” PLATITUDES? UGH.

- Everything happens for a reason.
- You have a new angel in Heaven.
- God only takes the most special people.
- God needed her more than you do.
- Only the good die young.
- At least he went quickly and now he’s finally with God!



## WE DON'T NEED PLATITUDES.

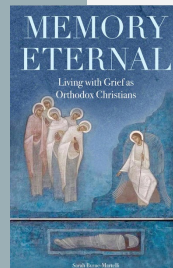
Having beheld the resurrection of Christ, let us worship the holy Lord Jesus, the only sinless One. We venerate Your Cross, O Christ, and we praise and glorify Your holy resurrection; for You are our God and we know no other than You. We call on Your name. O Come all ye faithful, let us venerate Christ's holy resurrection! For behold, through the cross joy has come into all the world. Let us ever bless the Lord, praising His resurrection. For by enduring the cross for us, He has destroyed death by death. (The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom)



Olga: “I prayed so hard for [my grandfather] not to die. Now I see that when you pray, sometimes God says yes, sometimes no, and sometimes, I have something better for you. The thing is, the Orthodox believe differently than a lot of people. My friend at work lost his son, and he just keeps saying, “I don’t believe in God now, what kind of a God would do this to me?” I just have to say to him, “We don’t understand this, it’s a mystery, and we live in a fallen world.”

Jesus came, Jesus himself died to abolish death, we are healed in death.

Imagine if we were here, and Jesus never came? I can’t imagine!”





## PLEASE TRY NOT TO SAY...



- » She is in a better place.
  - » That's so horrible. I would never be able to deal with that. You're so strong.
  - » At least you . . . (had a baby/had a husband...)
  - » Heaven gained an angel.
  - » Everything will be okay.
  - » Time will heal all wounds.
  - » You will get over it.
  - » It's time to get on with your life.
  - » Let me know if I can do anything.
- (Rather than putting the burden on the griever to ask for help, it is better to directly offer specific ways to help: "What can I get you from the store?" "I'm dropping off takeout food—do you have any food restrictions or preferences?" "Tell me what time you can drop your children off for a playdate this weekend." "I'm going to shovel the snow in your driveway today." "I brought you a coffee." "Do you have plans for Christmas Day? Join us.")

## PLEASE DO SAY...



- » I care about you.
- » I don't know what you're going through, but I am here to listen and I want to support you.
- » My heart is breaking for you.
- » We love you and we love [your loved one].
- » Let's go for a walk on Saturday. Are you free at 6 pm?
- » Do you want to join us for Thanksgiving?
- » Did I ever tell you the funny story about [your loved one]?
- » I think [your loved one] was such a great person (or a kind soul, a good teacher, a beautiful singer, a loving parent, a devoted grandmother, and so forth).
- » I was thinking about [your loved one] the other day.
- » Your son looks so much like your husband...
- » Would you like a quiet space, or food, or a listening ear, or someone to watch the kids?
- » Tell me what you miss about [your loved one].
- » I am praying for you.
- » May your loved one's memory be eternal.

To whom do we turn?

To Whom *should* we turn?

Recenter ourselves in Christ.

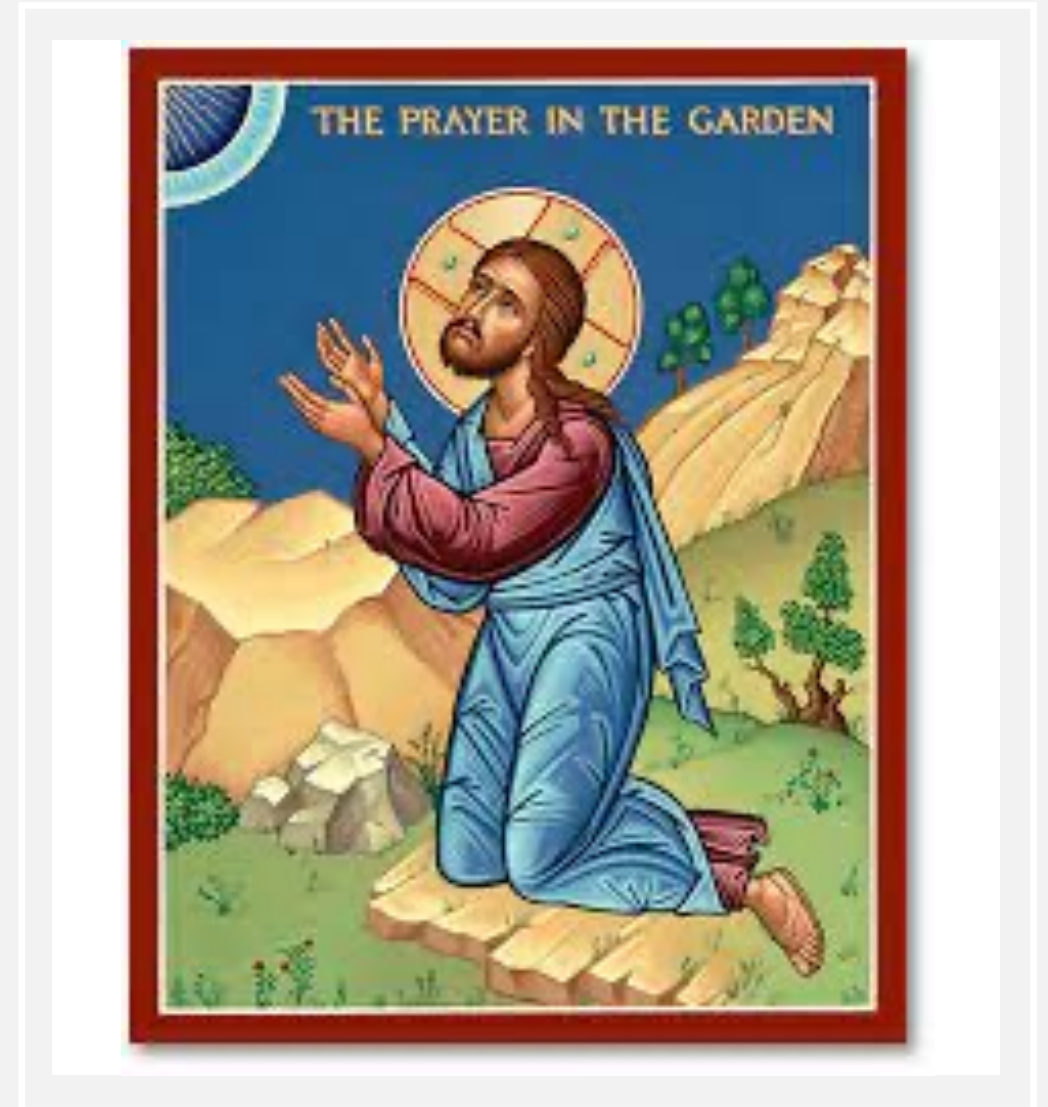
In personal prayer, in the sacraments,  
in humility, in Scripture:

**Psalm 130:1**, *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!”*

**Psalm 6:3**, *“My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?”*

**Psalm 10:1**, *“Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”*

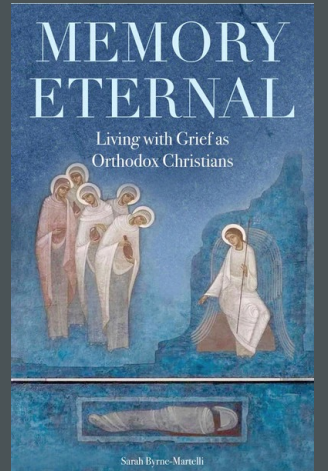
**Psalm 88:1-4**, *“Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.”*





## Resources:

Orthodox Christian Association of  
Medicine, Psychology, and Religion:  
Annual Conference  
Communities of Practice  
[ocampr.org](http://ocampr.org)



Assembly of Bishops Mental Health Video Series

Assembly of Bishops Mental Health Providers  
Directory

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Thank you!