

“Rest in Power”

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All Saints Sunday

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¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.
(Ephesians 1:11-23)

Earlier this week I went into CVS to pick something up, and I was not surprised to see that the clearance aisle near the checkout was filled with unsold Halloween decorations. Prominent among them were the little Styrofoam headstones that people put out in their yards -- you know, the ones with joke names like Chris P. Bacon; dear departed Brother Dave, who chased a bear into a cave; Jonathan Blake, who stepped on the gas instead of the brake; and the classic nod to Bart Simpson, the OG, the late, great Mr. Seymour Butts.

A lot of those novelty tombstones begin with same three capital letters: “R-I-P.” The idea of “resting in peace” has become so ubiquitous, so much a part of our cultural vocabulary, that we no longer have to spell it out. The acronym is sufficient to convey a Christian hope and perspective that is almost as old as the Christian church itself. Its origins are likely linked to the writings of the prophet Isaiah, who observed that those who are righteous, when they die, are “*taken away from calamity, and they enter into peace... and rest.*”¹ The Latin phrase “*dormit in pace,*” meaning that the deceased “sleeps in peace,” has been observed in early Christian catacombs. The epitaph was a confirmation that the one who passed on had been a faithful follower of Christ in life and had “died in the peace of the Church.”²

¹ Isaiah 57:1-2.

² <https://www.thoughtco.com/requiescat-in-pace-120922>



Later, the Roman Catholic burial mass would begin incorporating a variation on that phrase. "*Erue, Domine, animam ejus,*" the priest would pray. "*Requiescat in pace.*" "Deliver his soul, O Lord. May he begin to rest in peace."

The phrase "requiescat in pace" began appearing on Christian tombstones around the fifth century, but the practice really became popular in the 1700's.

On this day when we remember and give thanks for the saints of the church who have come before us, we claim this faith tradition that looks at death not as the end, but as a new beginning. It gives us comfort to affirm that everlasting peace is one of the blessings and gifts given to us by God when our time on earth is done. This is why, still today, as graveside committal services come to a close, we offer a special prayer to God: "*O Lord, support all of us gathered here all the day long -- until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the struggles of the day are done. In your mercy, grant us safe lodging, and holy rest, and peace at the last. Stand by those who sorrow, that, as they lean on your strength, they may be upheld, and believe the good news of the life everlasting.*" These ideas form the heart and soul of Christian hope – peace at the last.

Interestingly though, this passage in the opening chapter of the letter to the Ephesians does not speak of peace. It does speak to the future -- the hope we have at the end of our lives. Specifically, the passage mentions our **hope** in Christ... the riches of our **inheritance** in Christ... the enduring **mark** and **seal** of the Holy Spirit upon us... our eternal **destiny** with God. These are things we can expect from God not only in this life but in the next one as well. Peace, curiously enough, is noticeably absent.

In fact, there is little about this text that seems to want to ease us gently into that good night. Instead of a *decrecendo*, the music in this letter of faith seems to want to build to a glorious flourish with crashing cymbals and trumpets blaring. What I hear is the voice of a powerful preacher like Martin Luther King, Jr...

*"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may [wake you up], so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great **power**. God put this **power** to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all **rule** and **authority** and **power** and **dominion**, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him **the head over all things** for the church, which is his body, the **fullness** of him who fills all in all."*

This vision of Christian eternity is far from a peaceful slumber. You think it's been interesting so far, well, you ain't seen nothing yet!

Perhaps that is why, a few years back, a very different view of death began to rise up. A new mantra began to take root in places where life was marked with more pain than peace. A new prayer started being lifted by those who knew more about struggle than serendipity. Yes, those people hoped that death would bring some blessed relief to the injustices and inhumanities they had suffered, but they dared to long for more than peace, more than just the end of suffering. They chose to hope that, in the next life, things would not just be peaceful, but that they would also be set right... that in death the sovereign

authority God would finally be seen and felt... that evil would be brought to its knees and a new creation of justice and righteousness would rise up from the ashes.

According to etymologist Barry Popik, the phrase first began appearing in the graffiti art of Oakland, California. The fact that Oakland had given rise to the Black Panther movement in the 60's and became a center of the Black Lives Matter movement decades later is probably no coincidence. But a key moment came when, in February of 2000, beloved local artist Mike "Dream" Francisco was shot and killed during a robbery. A Filipino immigrant, Francisco had created an artistic community, a school of graffiti painters who shared their anger, lament, and prophetic hopes in the art they created on the streets of Oakland. When their leader was struck down by that tragic act of injustice, his students sent a collective message to and for their fallen prophet. They painted a new epitaph all across the city with the revolutionary phrase "Rest in Power."³

In coming years, that mantra would be taken up by marginalized people in all kinds of places, but most notably in black and LGBTQ communities in the United States. People who have experienced the sting of systemic prejudice in very personal ways – people who have borne the cruel, repeated blows of homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism – lift up the words "rest in power" as an expression of mourning and remembrance. They are spoken to show respect for those who have died in the midst of a great struggle, not only that they would finally have peace, but also in the hope that their deaths may not have been in vain.

That, I believe, is the spirit of these ancient words from Ephesians. As we give thanks for the saints who have lived and died in Christ, we recognize that their lives, like all of ours, were far from perfect. Every person, every life, in some way shares the universal human experience that Longfellow described as thus...

*My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
My thoughts still cling to the mouldering Past,
But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast,
And the days are dark and dreary.*

Over time, something happened to the old Latin prayer "requiescat in pace." As the secular world embraced the acronym "RIP," it became more of an observation that the journey of the body is over, so it really has no choice but to rest in peace. But through the eyes of faith, the reference remains a hope for something more, a hope that is anything but passive. And it begins, as Longfellow says, with a recognition that, in God, the light shines even in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it...

*Be still, sad heart! and cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
Thy fate is the common fate of all,*

³ Rachele Hampton, "How 'Rest in Power' Went From Radical Eulogy to Kitschy Twitter Meme," <https://slate.com/culture/2019/09/rest-in-power-phrase-history-appropriation-black-activists.html>, September 30, 2019.

*Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.*⁴

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be -- our hope in Christ is that the light continues to shine, and even on those days that are cold, dark, and dreary, there is a promise of future warmth and solace. When the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the struggles of the day are done, God will grant us, too, safe lodging and holy rest.

But we dare to hope for more than just rest. In Christ, we claim a more glorious inheritance than that – one that is made alive in **resurrection power** – the power that shattered the strength of the cross, broke the barrier of the tomb, and not only raised Christ from the dead, but seated him at the right hand of God in the heavenly places, far above all **rule** and **authority** and **power** and **dominion**, to a place that above every name, not only in this age but also in the age to come. That power paints a new epitaph on creation – a message that death is not the end, but the beginning of new life.

Our Christian hope is not just to rest in peace, but to rest also in power. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Rainy Day,” https://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=147.