

## **Honor your dead loved ones' lives**

### **In Exile**

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As Christians, we believe in the "communion of saints." We believe that those who have died are not only still alive but that they are, as well, still in a real relationship with us.

But how? How do we find our loved ones after they have died?

It is interesting to note that Christianity, unlike some other religions, has never had a significant cult around dead bodies or cemeteries. We respect them, reverence them, but we do not try to mummify our dead (as the ancient Egyptians did), nor do we have much in the way of special ceremonies or religious rituals around cemeteries. There's a reason for that.

On Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdala and some other women, armed with spices in view of embalming his dead body, went to Jesus' grave. But they didn't find him there. Instead they found an angel who (in effect) asked them: "Why are you looking in a cemetery for someone who is alive?" "He's not here," the angel added, "go instead to Galilee and he will meet you there."

That instruction is still valid today: When we are looking to meet our loved ones who have died we will find them in Galilee more so than in any cemetery. Where and what is Galilee?

Galilee, for Mary Magdala and the contemporaries of Jesus, was more than a place on a map, the northern part of Israel. It was also, and especially, the place where Jesus' spirit had flourished, the place they had first met him, the place of his key miracles, and the place where their own spirits had been stretched, and warmed by contact with him. Galilee

represented the place of their innocence, their first fervour, their initial learning, their first falling in love.

Now, after Jesus' death, they were asked to go back to that place as the privileged spot where Jesus would meet them again.

And our faith says the same thing to us: Like Mary Magdala and the early Christian believers, we can meet our deceased loved ones by going back to Galilee by going to those places where their spirits flourished and where our spirits were instructed, stretched and warmed by contact with them. Allow me an example:

My own parents died 30 years ago and are now buried, side by side, in a little cemetery in the rural countryside where I grew up.

Sometimes when I'm home, I visit their graves, say a few prayers there, and remind myself of what each of them gave me. But it's not where I really meet my mother and father.

I meet them, more deeply, in Galilee, that is, in those places where their souls most flourished and where they took God's boundless, beautiful, colourful, life-giving energy and enfolded it.

For example: My mother was a woman of great generosity, kind-hearted and selfless to a fault. When I go to that place, when I'm generous and kind-hearted, I feel my mother's laugh, sense her consolation and find myself again warmed by her warmth. Conversely, at those times when I'm petty and selfish it does me little good to adorn her grave with flowers or prayers. She's there too, like God's presence, faithful when we're unfaithful.

But when I'm not in her Galilee, it's harder for her to meet me and give me what she once gave me.

It's the same with my father: His great quality was his integrity, his moral stubbornness, his refusal to compromise his unrelenting insistence that one should always take the high road, the one less-travelled. When I prove myself his son in this, I feel his presence, his humour, his intelligence, his solid hand on my shoulder, his trustworthiness.

Conversely, when I make moral compromises, he's still present, but his humour, intelligence, and trustworthy hand, can no longer nurture me in the same way. Where do we find our loved ones after they have died? Where will others find us after we have died? In Galilee, in those places where we most give our own unique expression to God's boundless energy.

We should honour our dead and honour the cemeteries where their bodies now rest, but we meet our deceased in Galilee, in those places where their spirits flourished and where our own souls were stretched and instructed and warmed in our contact with them.

More than honouring their graves, we need to honour their lives, we need to honour the wonderful energy that they uniquely incarnated and which, in turn, nurtured, instructed, stretched, cajoled, consoled, warmed, teased, humoured, steadied and blessed us.

When we do, our relationship with them does not just continue, it deepens.