



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# SWEET RELIEF

## Greek Burial Rites and Ritual Lamentation

From ancient Greek burial rites to the fascinating Greek Christian tradition of lamentation, *Road to Emmaus* traces the universal desire to grieve and the ritual mourning that survives until now in traditional Christian cultures.

*“What sweet relief to sufferers it is  
to weep, to mourn, lament, and  
chant the dirge that tells of grief!”*

Euripides, *The Trojan Women*

The early pre-Christian Greeks believed that at the moment of death the *psyche* or spirit of the dead, left the body as a little breath or puff of wind. The deceased was then prepared for burial according to time-honored rituals: the body was washed, anointed with oil, and adorned with a wreath, then dressed and placed on a high bed within the house. For the classical Greeks, Charos was the ferryman of the dead who took the soul to Hades, the underworld, and the mouth was sometimes covered with a coin as symbolic payment to convey the soul from the world of the living. Usually the women of the family conducted rituals that included the laying out of the body (*prosthesis*), the funeral procession (*ekphora*), and the burial in earth or internment in a tomb.<sup>1</sup> From the *The Iliad*, we know that the neglect of such burial rites was seen as an insult to human dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Once the death was known, relatives and friends came to mourn and pay their respects, while women of the family, community, and sometimes pro-

<sup>1</sup> The classical Athenians, who frequently cremated their dead, were a rare exception to the widespread classical practice of burying in an individual grave or family tomb.

*Opposite: Attic Greek terracotta funerary plaque with lamenting women. Early sixth century BC. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.*

fessional mourners, lamented with funeral dirges until just before dawn when the procession to the cemetery took place. <sup>2</sup> After the burial the house and household objects were thoroughly cleansed with seawater and hyssop, with the women most closely related to the dead taking part.

The ritual washing was followed by a funeral feast in the home, the *perideipnom*, which the dead man “hosted” as a sign of gratitude towards those who had taken part in burying him. Thereafter, women relatives made regular visits to the grave with offerings that included milk, honey, mixed perfumes and oils, small cakes of meal, honey and oil, and libations. Monumental earth mounds, marble tombs, statues, and engraved stones marked the grave.

For the classical Greeks immortality lay in the continued remembrance of the dead by the living. Exceptional individuals might be remembered forever as heroes, but the memory of most individuals faded after a few generations into the collective dead. In some areas of Greece these were referred to as “thrice-ancestors” (*tritopatores*), and there were annual festivals devoted to their memories.<sup>ii</sup>

Like the pre-Christian Greeks, in the Hebrew world God did not reach Sheol or Hades and souls there lived in oblivion; death reigned over both sinners and righteous with no distinction between them.<sup>2</sup>

## Orthodox Christian Burial Rites

For early Christians and for today’s Orthodox as well, death was conquered by the Lord’s descent into hell. In bursting the bonds of Hades and releasing the righteous that had gone before, Christ showed both his Divinity and His utmost compassion towards humanity.<sup>iii</sup>

Although there is much that is similar in human burial customs of our own time to the ancient ways, much has also changed. Orthodox Christians believe in eternal life, that the deceased is alive with God, and that although death is the temporary separation of the soul from the body, they will be reunited at the General Resurrection. This belief in the eternal life of the soul and integrity of the body underscores the need for burial and the traditional Christian ban, still held by Orthodox, against cremation as a willful destruction of God’s creation.

<sup>2</sup> In modern Judaism there are a variety of views on the afterlife depending on the branch of Judaism and individual notions, ranging from a state similar to the Christian heaven to a place of neutral rest waiting for the Messiah, to punishment for the wicked.

The passing of an Orthodox Christian is often preceded by a priest providing the sacraments of Confession, Holy Communion and Holy Unction (usually earlier in the illness). When death is imminent, he will read special prayers for the departure of the soul.

As soon as possible after death, the priest reads an abbreviated memorial service called the *Trisagion* over the body.<sup>3</sup> Those attending hold candles; the priest uses incense and holy water, and may give a short sermon. The *Trisagion* is often read again before taking the body from the funeral home to the church. In Orthodox Greece, Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East the deceased are not embalmed, and are generally buried within 24-48 hours. In many places a local person skilled in laying out the dead may come to help the family, and the vigil with its accompanying *Trisagion* is often served by the priest in the family home, where the body is lamented over until the burial.

Relatives and friends remain to support the family until the body is removed to the cemetery, and then take turns reading the psalter over the deceased Christian until the funeral service the following day. Although home wakes are less usual in Europe and the United States, it is legal and entirely possible to care for a loved one's body, and to bury the person with dignity without going through a mortuary funeral home. A good reference for this is a book by Deacon Mark and Elizabeth Barna, *A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition*.<sup>iv</sup>

In Greek churches the funeral is served separately from Divine Liturgy, while in the Russian tradition it usually follows Divine Liturgy, with the Greek funeral taking about an hour and the Russian somewhat longer. Just as the ancient Greeks engaged professional mourners, Orthodox Christians will ask a well-spoken priest, relative, or acquaintance to give a eulogy. At the end of the funeral service those present move to the front of the church where they bow in front of the open casket and kiss an icon or cross laid on the chest of the deceased. Those of the Slavic tradition may also kiss a paper or cloth band inscribed with a cross on the person's brow. The immediate family members stand near the casket and guests express their sympathy to the family. The service is followed by a procession to the cemetery where the priest performs the Rite of Burial.

Like the classical Greeks, Orthodox families traditionally host a memorial meal after the funeral, often serving fish (associated with Christ eating

<sup>3</sup> The Russians have a similar memorial service (*Panikhida*), which may be abbreviated or not.

fish after His Resurrection), olives, cheese, salads, savoury pastries such as *spanakopita* and *tyropita*, and wine. In Russia, *blini*, similar to French crepes, are served with caviar, a practice dating from pre-Christian times where the blini represent the return of the life-giving sun and caviar the hope of new life. Dishes vary according to a family's homeland of origin.

The customary period of mourning is forty days, during which relatives of the reposed read psalms for their loved one's soul. Relatives and friends visit the home of the grieving family both before and after the funeral, bringing food and drink to share. In Greece immediate family members wear black clothing for this period and do not participate in social occasions such as parties, dances, or family celebrations and may not even listen to music. Some individuals extend this to a year and many Greek widows (less frequently widowers) continue to wear black for the rest of their lives.

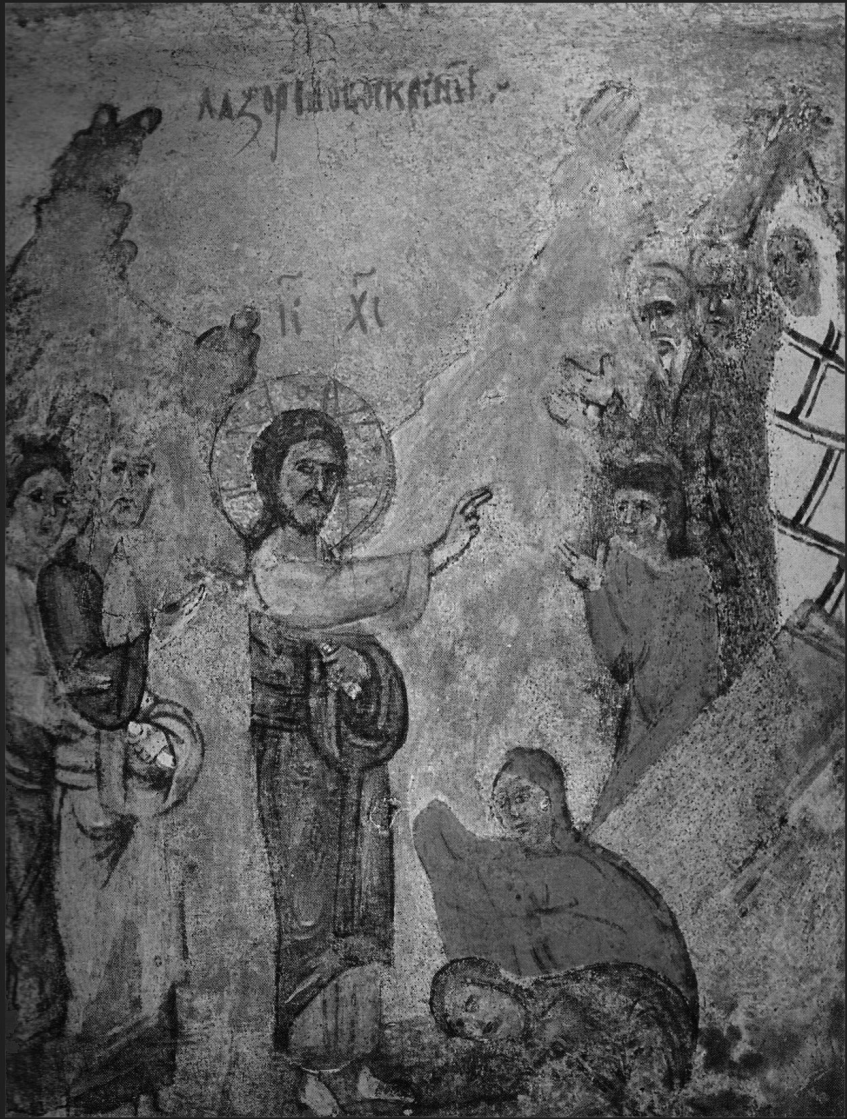
## Memorial Services Following the Funeral

A series of memorial services follow the funeral and are very significant in Orthodox culture. At these services the priest, family members, and friends pray for forgiveness, mercy and rest for the soul of the deceased, believing that our prayers for them are blessed by Christ who instructs us to pray for one another.

The *Mnimosyno*, a slightly longer service than the *Trisagion* (though not as long as a full Russian *Panikhida*), is usually held after Divine Liturgy on the Sunday closest to the fortieth day after death in memory of Christ's forty days on earth after his Resurrection. Family members sit or stand in the front of the church. From the time of the classical Greeks through the Christian era, the family has provided a tray or bowl of *kolyva* – boiled wheat berries (representing the cycle of death and regeneration) prepared with sugar or honey, nuts, dried fruit and spices. Decorated with a cross, it is placed on a table with candles at the front of the church or at the memorial cross. At the end of the service the *kolyva* is distributed to those in attendance in remembrance of the Lord's words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Jn 12:24).

Memorial services are also often held at three and six months after the repose and especially on the first three anniversaries. Psalms can be read daily

*Opposite: Fifteenth-century Russian icon, The Raising of Lazarus.*



ΛΑΖΑΡΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΒΕΘΑΝΙΑΙΟΥ

Π ΧΙ

for the first year for the peaceful transition and repose of the soul. Collective memorials are also celebrated on the Saturdays dedicated to prayers for all souls—*Psychosavata*—which occur four times a year, depending on the dates of Lent and Easter, mirroring the remembrance of the collective dead, the “thrice-ancestors” of ancient and classical Greece. Today people bring lists of the names of their departed to the church on these days for remembrance.

Traditions such as the lament vigil before the burial, procession to the cemetery, the making of *kolyva*, and the periodic remembrance of all souls seem to have been taken into Christianity from the pre-Christian Middle Eastern and Greek burial rites. There is something comforting in this for us moderns that ancient patterns (such as using bread and wine for ritual meals) are not only alive and well, but baptized into the fullness of Christ’s love for us.

### Ritual Lamentation

One of the most intriguing rebaptisms from the ancient world is ritualized lamentation, in which the widow or nearest kin, other relatives, neighbors, and even professional mourners freely wail, lament, and create spontaneous dirges for the departed. Lamentation reached such a level of art in classical Greece that it was incorporated into Greek tragedy and included antiphonal choral “call and response” between a single lamenter and the chorus in plays by Euripides and Aristophanes; a similar form is still practiced in modern Greece. While traditional lamentation is still strongly preserved in Middle Eastern Orthodox, Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopian cultures, and less frequently in Greece, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, it is relatively unknown today in Northern Europe and North America.<sup>iv</sup>

The practice of using professional mourners was common in ancient and classical Greece and in early Christianity as well. St. Gregory of Nyssa spoke of lament in the vigil that took place before the funeral of his sister, Macrina. Psalms, hymns, and scripture readings expressing the theology of the death and resurrection were accompanied by a popular form of lament relating the human tragedy of death and the grief of those left behind.

In archaic and classical Greece, as well as parts of rural modern Greece such as Epirus, Mani, and the island of Crete, lament is performed during the wake, the procession to the cemetery, and at the grave itself. It is always the duty of women. Traditional Greek lament is laden with depth and emotional



intensity. It is always improvised and focuses on the separation of the dead from their family, the loneliness of those left behind, and the misfortune of the dead. The verses of the lament are declaimed antiphonally, based on the discourse between women. Because the vigil is held in public, the lament also carries a message to the living, conveying the pain of the lamenter and her community. Lament is also connected to physical actions such as tearing at the face and hair, beating the breast, and the age-old rending of garments. Although some dirges are made up of single line exclamations punctuated by groans and cries, they can be much more elaborate. The noted English travel writer and hero of World War II Greece, Patrick Leigh Fermor, writes of the *miroloyia* (“words of destiny”) sung in the Mani:

...the dirges of the Mani are a very different matter from these unco-ordinated cries. They are entire poems, long funeral hymns with a strict discipline of meter.... They are sung extempore by the graveside, and it seems that the Maniot women, like the unlettered mountaineers in Crete in the invention of *mantinades*, have this extraordinary knack of improvisation.... Anyone who has heard the speed with which the Cretans can turn any incident on the spot into a faultless rhyming couplet, and each time with an epigrammatic sting in the second line, will not find this hard to believe. The similarity of these *miroloyia* with the themes of ancient Greek literature... tempts one to think that here again is a direct descendant of Ancient Greece, a custom stretching back, perhaps, till before the Siege of Troy.<sup>v</sup>

This spontaneous uncontrollable grief is akin to that of a soldier who goes berserk in battle as a revolt against betrayal and injustice, a state that often comes to a head for the soldier with the death of close friends. As Orthodox ethicist Dr. Timothy Patitsas points out, the traumatized berserker has stepped outside communion with his fellow soldiers and society and must be re-folded into that liturgy through an empathetic community.<sup>vi</sup> Like the war berserker, the violent force of lament is seen as an altered state, sometimes bordering on temporary madness, and the grief of these mourners is sometimes so forceful that it frightens onlookers.

In contrast to the berserker, however, the bereaved Greek woman does not lament alone—kinswomen or professional mourners are there to join her in antiphonal mourning by ritually answering her observations or simply taking



over if she tires or loses control. The isolated self-excommunication of grieving is allowed to express within limits, but excesses are avoided as the intensity of mourning is controlled and defined by custom, ritual, and the circle of women who share the grief. Such a traditional structure ties the mourner not only to her community, but to generations who have come before, and prevents her from descending into a subhuman isolation. The consciousness that lament is an epic art, whose dignity and form needs to be sustained, keeps sung lament focused, no matter how grief-stricken the singer.

This shared keening supports the mourning woman, creating a “sisterhood of pain” that allows for communal grief and resistance to the natural or social forces that have brought about the death. As one verse from a modern Epirot lament reads:

Come women! Let you who are still untried, and us who've  
known sorrows,  
Join together our tears, shape them into a river;  
And let the river turn to lake, to seashore, water fountain...  
(Oh, my love, my eyes!)<sup>vii</sup>

Such mourning confronts incurable loss in a forceful expression of grief that focuses on the life and misfortune of the deceased and the pains and grievances of the lamenter herself. Themes expressed by such personal pain (*ponoi*) include isolation, widowhood, lack of support, the raising of children, failures of doctors, and grievances against war, unjust social policies, death itself, and may even call for revenge—one of the few times a woman in rural Greek society can declaim publicly in social protest. The following lines are from the lament of an Epirot widow whose husband Yianni died in World War II:

“Go beyond Gribala mountain, go to Gribala peak  
(I can't bear it, Yianni!)  
To find proud, young bodies there all bathed in dark blood  
(Oh, I can't bear it, Yianni!)  
To find their poor mothers singing laments for them.  
(Oh, my luck is awful!)

*Opposite: Mosaic of the Lamentation of the Mother of God, Jerusalem.*

How bitter the wound! How poisonous the gunshot!  
    Damned be the war!  
Damn it a thousand times!  
    (Oh, what a terrible fate!)  
It takes children away from mothers, brothers away from brothers.  
    (Awful, awful fate!)  
And it tears man away from wife, though they love each other.  
    (My fate is awful!)  
And on the spot on which they part, no grass can ever grow.<sup>viii</sup>

While to modern sensibility such lamentation with its accompanying physical gestures may seem frenzied and extravagant, Fermor describes the wholesome undercurrent of such mourning:

The fact that custom has evolved a formal framework for grief takes nothing away from its authenticity or from the sting of pity it evokes. There was a deep wisdom behind the orgiastic and hysterical aspect of ancient religion; there is much to be said in favour of this flinging open of the floodgates to grief. It might be argued that the decorous little services of the West, the hushed voices, the self-control, our brave smiles and calmness either stifle the emotion of sorrow completely, or drive it underground where it lodges and proliferates in a malign and dangerous growth that festers for a lifetime.<sup>ix</sup>

Lamentation is expressed with such intensity only for a defined period of time. If a grieving widow, sister, or daughter moves into a darker place of more serious self-harm, she will be succoured by other lamenters. Through physical presence and a verbal “call and response,” they enfold her in a formulaic re-communion after each expression of grief. As one keener tires, another singer steps in to take over the lament, and this strong and direct confrontation with pain enables the bereaved to move through it.<sup>x</sup> The feast after the funeral customarily marks the end of the most violent and powerful mourning. Strong emotions return over the next days and weeks, but they slowly taper off into remembrance of the qualities and virtues of the deceased.

Contemporary anthropologists frequently view Greek women’s lamentation as exotically primitive, archaic, political, and feminist—separate from and opposed to the Orthodox Church and its liturgical rites. In this they are

mistaken, as are modern Christians who find such practices distasteful and even blasphemous. What is not understood is that this is not a cry against God, even if those words are used. It is the universal human outcry against the reality of death that sunders us from our loved ones, and in the end from our own living flesh. This is a noble response, indeed a Christian one—a railing against the Fall, against the unnatural tyranny of death, and against anything that attempts to break the ties of love that bind us to one another.

Understood correctly, the Orthodox Christian funeral and burial service is a powerful channel of grace; that in the very moment of burying the beloved, the Church re-liturgizes and re-communes the bereaved—not only by acknowledging the pain of grief, but by uniting this particular death to the bitter and tragic crucifixion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to His triumphant Resurrection, and to the expectation of His glorious Second Coming when all will be restored.

### Lamentation in the Church Fathers and Holy Week Services

In looking to the Church Fathers for clues as to how they practiced Christian mourning, there is little stoicism in sight. Here, for instance, are extracts of St. Gregory of Nyssa's funeral oration for Patriarch Meletius of Antioch, who presided over the First Ecumenical Council in 381. For St. Gregory, strength in the face of loss means not to suppress one's grief, but rather to express the tragic fullness of the loss without flinching.

Most pitiable we! For the unseasonableness of our orphaned condition does not permit us to congratulate ourselves on our father's happy lot. For him, indeed, better it was by his departure hence to be with Christ, but it was a grievous thing for us to be severed from his fatherly guidance. Behold, it is a time of need for counsel; and our counsellor is silent. War, the war of heresy encompasses us, and our leader is no more. The general body of the Church labours under disease, and we find not the physician. See in what a strait we are.

...Oh! That it were possible I could nerve my weakness, and rising to the full proportions of our loss, burst out with a voice of lamentation adequate to the greatness of the distress.... From what quar-

ter will that ray shine forth, now that our star has set? Oh! evil moonless night that gives no hope of any star!

...Oh! The sad tidings which tell the Church of her calamity! Who shall say to the children that they have no more a father? Who shall tell the Bride she is a widow? ...Let alone, you that would console; let alone; force not on us your consolation. Let the widow indulge the deepness of her grief. Let her feel the loss that has been inflicted on her....<sup>xi</sup>

And what cradle Orthodox or eager convert following the entire Great Lent and Holy Week services in *The Lenten Triodion* hasn't experienced the build-up of betrayal, tragedy, and loss that is almost overwhelming. Finally at somber twilight on Good Friday we begin the lamentations of the Virgin before the *epitaphion* which channels the intense heaviness and sorrow of the week into the cathartic and uplifting *Enkomia* (Praises).<sup>4</sup> Consisting of three stases, the first contains verses of mournful lament reflecting thousands of years of Greek and Middle Eastern tradition:

O Jesus, my sweetness and light of salvation, how art Thou hidden in a dark tomb? O forbearance ineffable, beyond all words!

The Ewe, seeing her Lamb slaughtered, was pierced with anguish: and she cried aloud in grief, calling the flock to lament with her.

“Woe is me, Light of the world! Woe is me, my Light! Jesus my heart's desire,” cried the Virgin in her bitter grief.

Tears of lamentation the pure Virgin shed over Thee, Jesus, and with a mother's grief she cried: ‘How shall I bury Thee, my Son?’

“O hills and valley, the multitude of men, and all creation, weep and lament with me, the Mother of our God!”

<sup>4</sup> The *Enkomia* (Praises) is part of the Matins service for Holy Saturday, usually served on Good Friday evening.

Like the classical and modern Greek laments, the service is antiphonal, alternating lines of psalms intoned by the choir with verses of lament sung by the clergy. In over two hundred antiphonal exchanges the mood goes from mourning to expectation, ending with the anticipation of Christ's Resurrection, bringing new life and recreating the world:

Today Thou dost keep holy the seventh day,  
Which Thou hast blessed of old by resting from Thy works.  
Thou bringest all things into being and Thou makest all things new,  
Observing the Sabbath rest, my Saviour, and restoring Thy strength...  
By Thy Resurrection give peace to the Church and salvation to Thy  
people.<sup>xii</sup>

So, let us depart in peace. ✠

i Lada Stevanovic, "Funeral Ritual and Power: Farewelling the Dead in the Ancient Greek Funerary Ritual," Institute of Ethnography SASA, 2009, pp. 37-40, accessed May, 15, 2015 at <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-0861/2009/0350-08610902037S.pdf>

ii Ibid.

iii Irina Kukota, "Christ the Medicine of Life: The Syriac Fathers on Christ's Descent into Hell," *Road to Emmaus Journal*, Vol. 6, No.1 (Winter, 2005, Issue #20), pp. 17-57.

iv J. Mark and Elizabeth Barna, *A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition*, Divine Ascent Press, Manton, California, 2011.

v Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Mani, Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*, John Murray Publishers, 1958, (reprint, NY Review of Books, pp. 71-72).

vi Dr. Timothy Patitsas, "The Opposite of War is Not Peace: Healing Trauma in *The Iliad* and in Orthodox Tradition," *Road to Emmaus Journal*, Vol 14, No. 1 (Spring, 2013, Issue #52), pp. 26-51.

vii Andrea Fishman, "*Threnoï to Moirologia: Female Voices of Solitude, Resistance, and Solidarity*," *Oral Tradition*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2008, pp. 267-295. Accessed 5/2015, [http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/23ii/07\\_23.2.pdf](http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/23ii/07_23.2.pdf)

viii Fishman, p. 272.

ix Fermor, p. 70.

x Fishman, p. 285.

xi St. Gregory of Nyssa, "Funeral Oration on Meletius." Accessed May, 2015 at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2909.htm>.

xii Verses from the *Enkomia* service are from the "Holy and Great Saturday Service" in *The Lenten Triodion*, (trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware), Faber and Faber, London, 1978 (Reprint, St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, PA), pp. 622-644.