

Grave digging

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue



The memorial garden of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa. Photo courtesy of St. Paul Lutheran Church.

I keep a 36-inch utility shovel in my church office. Its handle leans gently against the shelf holding my favorite theological volumes. Office guests have eyed that shovel curiously over the years, though none of them have gathered the gumption to ask about it. Maybe they think I'm part pastor, part contractor. An antique construction level hangs on the adjoining wall—a reminder to keep life in balance.

With this shovel, I dig the graves that hold the cremains of our congregation's saints. Purchased at a hardware store for \$21, it has become the holiest shovel I've ever held. I don't even risk it to the custodian's safekeeping, fearful that it might get used for purposes other than turning sacred soil in a graveyard.

Church members who elect to be buried in our memorial garden take the "earth to earth, ashes to ashes" claim very seriously. They know that rich and poor get buried side by side in these unmarked graves. Brilliant and broken people rest together beneath the dahlia and delphinium. These people trust the conviction that something holds greater value at death than their ancestral lineage, bloodline, surname, or even a box to hold these familial treasures. That something is called baptism, specifically baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On the way to a Friday dinner date, I asked my wife if she would mind stopping by the church. I had a grave to dig before the rain came as predicted for the next

morning. She complied with the request and waited on a bench in the garden. I fetched the shovel, picked a plot between two serviceberry trees, and went to work. Four minutes into jumping on the blade—the clay-thick soil requires my every pound—Susan said, “Now tell me again why you are digging this grave? Have you ever thought of having one of the custodians take care of this? You have plenty else to do.” I told her in the gentlest terms, “No, honey. This is what I want to do.”

Excavating two-foot-deep holes is part of my expression of gratitude for people who have meant so much to our community and to me. In a gorgeous plot of land where life and death cohabit on a daily basis, I get to savor the richness wrapped up with the communion of saints.

I know the apostle Paul speaks of death as an enemy. But laboring over the soil in a cemetery and pouring ashes of loved ones into sculpted holes inspires a different thought. We can befriend death. Thanks to the invigorating freedom given us through faith, death can be more than a lost battle to a threatening stranger.

I wouldn't want to suggest that digging a grave under a gray sky generates warm exhilaration. I curse at the rocks and roots I come up against. Buried sprinkler pipes keep thwarting my dig sites. Yet last week, when I inadvertently split a few daffodil bulbs in half with the shovel, I realized I might be propagating more life, doubling it in one small plot of beautiful Iowa soil.