

## Death of a preacher

By [Teri McDowell Ott](#)

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The grandson's voice was hesitant on the phone. He was calling on behalf of his grandmother, who expected her preacher husband to be buried in the quiet cemetery behind the first church he had served decades ago. I was the pastor now.

Perhaps the widow assumed I was younger and less experienced than I looked. Perhaps it was the pain of her grief that led her to condescend when she informed me I was not to preach at her husband's funeral, just read the scriptures (which had already been chosen, she said). She must be so sad, I thought to myself. I said nothing of the disrespect.

So the church gathered on a Saturday to surround the widow with love. She sat in the front pew, a tiny mite of a woman with sharp, steely eyes, in a dark blue dress. As I read her required scriptures I tried to read her face. She did not look at me once. Did she know what was happening? Did she know he was gone? I prayed for her and her family then raised my hands for the benediction.

*Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant Ralph. Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.*

Then her eyes were on me. I couldn't interpret her stare, so I kept reading.

*May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remain with you always. Amen.*

The organ piped in the postlude and we processed to the cemetery, where I buried her husband beneath the shade of our church's giant oaks. Afterwards, the church members served a meal to the family of their old preacher, whom they barely remembered. I lingered to eat and chat in spite of the sermon for Sunday that still

lay unfinished in a messy pile on my desk.

Anxious to leave, I crouched next to the chair of the old widow, in a gesture of respect for her loss, and squeezed her hand before saying a few words of goodbye. She turned and said something that got lost in the din of conversations echoing against the cinder blocks of the church's fellowship hall. So I leaned in to listen. What I expected were words of gratitude for the kindness shown, words of apology for pulling me away from my family on a warm, sunny, Saturday afternoon, or words of explanation as to why I had yet to receive a check. The widow leaned in too, her finger raised. Her eyes clearly fixed on my own.

"Next time," she said, "you memorize that benediction."

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