Death is not a subject many people are comfortable with. Most of us try to avoid talking about it, or we talk around it by using terms like “passed away” or “expired.” Even when someone who is dying wants to talk about his or her experience, people in our society tend to become embarrassed, and to say things like, “Don’t talk that way, you’re going to be fine.” But at some point every one of us will need to deal with the subject of death. So today we are going to talk about it honestly and openly, seeing how our faith gives us reason to celebrate, even at the most difficult of times.

Our first reading from the 2nd Book of Maccabees, the final book of the Old Testament, tells a terrible story of the violent deaths of eight members of one family, seven brothers and their mother. And yet their faith shines through, changing their defeat at the hands of their enemies into a story of hope and courage. They believed that death was not the final victor. Their story is very sad, but in the end there is reason to celebrate.

Just last week I visited a man in the hospital, a parishioner who was very near the end of his life. He was being sent home, and Hospice would be coming in to help. The next evening I went to his house, and when his son opened the door he told me my timing was perfect. I went into the man’s room and his wife was there beside him, holding his hand. She said to me, “How did you know to come? We were just going to call you.” Her husband’s life was fading. She told me there had been “angels” about the same level as saints visiting them: A nurse who was a friend had spent the night, and Maureen, one of our Ministers of the Eucharist had been wonderful.

I blessed the man, and prayed with the family. We thought he was unconscious, but then we saw his lips moving, saying something we couldn’t hear at first. It was, “God bless.” The man had heard our prayers, and now he was blessing us.

I knew that hearing is the last sense to go, and the man was clearly hearing us. So I took his wife aside and said, “Have you told him it’s okay for him to go?” She hadn’t, so she went to his side, took his hand in hers, and gave him permission to let go. She
could offer this loving gift to him because of her faith that he was going into the hands of a loving God, and in the end there is reason to celebrate.

For people who believe in Jesus, death is indeed an ending, a time for grief. But it is also a beginning, bringing the one we love into hope and lasting peace, and freedom from pain and sorrow. In today’s Gospel this is what Jesus was trying to tell the Saducees, who did not believe in an afterlife. The Saducees refused to believe him, but as Christians we take his words to heart. Our Book of Remembrance is like the empty tomb of Jesus: a reminder that the one we love has gone before us into new life, a life we can only imagine until we, too, see it face to face.

This is what we celebrate at every wake and funeral at this church. Even though there are tears, we believe that for those who have died, death is not the end. We believe that this life has prepared them to see the Risen Lord. Indeed, it is our hope that all our loved ones who have died have risen with Jesus into new life.

Listen again to that last statement: it is our hope that all our loved ones who have died have risen with Jesus into new life. Sadly, misconceptions at the time of a death can get in the way of celebrating this truth. It breaks my heart when I hear about families who never contacted us when a loved one died, afraid that we would turn them away. Please listen carefully: here at St. Stephen we do not turn anyone away who is dying, or anyone who wants to celebrate the funeral of a loved one in this church. If anyone has told you otherwise, they are very, very wrong.

Some people think that at the time of death, the church will pass some kind of judgment on a person and declare that that person is not worthy of a church funeral or burial. This is not true. We have no way of looking into a person’s heart and soul and making any such judgment, and we have no desire to try such a thing. Only God can see into the human heart.

Let me make myself clear. People have been afraid to call us when the person who has died was married outside the Church, or the person died because of suicide, or had AIDS, or the person was a family member who was not a Catholic, or perhaps some other complicated situation. None of these are reasons to turn anyone away. I anointed a lady at the hospital not that long ago who had lived for years with the fear
that she would be denied the final sacraments because of a divorce and a second marriage. I repeat: none of these are reasons to turn anyone away. Not marriage outside the church, not suicide, not AIDS, not church membership. Those who have died are in the hands of God. No human person and no institution can judge their status in relationship to the Creator.

Besides this kind of misinformation, another very sad factor that can keep people from calling us when someone has died is the issue of COST. Sometimes when a family member has died the first call is made to a funeral home, not to the church. But I am sorry to tell you that there are some funeral homes who give out information about church policies that is not correct. All too frequently funeral home employees who have no idea what they’re talking about will tell people who are in shock and grief: “The church says you need to do this”, or “You’re not allowed to do that.” Callers can get the impression that a church funeral is much more expensive than a service held at the funeral home. This is the exact opposite of the truth. In fact, we do all our wake services in our beautiful Chapel, in an atmosphere of warmth and hospitality, at no cost to anyone.

Again, people sometimes think that anyone who chooses cremation cannot have a funeral in a Catholic church. Instead they are told that they have to purchase an expensive casket, followed by an elaborate and costly service. This claim is also untrue, yet much additional grief has been caused by such misinformation. Please check with us even before calling a funeral home. When people call us, we are able to give them straight and truthful information that can save them trouble and expense. The St. Stephen website also has extensive information available through the “Funerals” link on our home page. Remember: this is not a business to us. We do not make money when someone dies. We are here to help families and friends celebrate a person’s entrance into new life.

This is what we are all about: celebrating the life of Jesus, and celebrating our own eternal connection with his life. When Jesus appeared to his friends after his own death and resurrection, his first words were: “Do not be afraid.” Can we hear his words? Can we talk to those closest to us about death, or are we afraid? Can we talk to our children, or do we try to change the subject whenever death is mentioned? Every human family has its own personal Book of Remembrance written in the hearts of its members. On this Veterans’ Day we can see that our nation has a Book of
Remembrance, too, honoring all those who have given their lives for our country. We all know that dealing with death is a part of life on this earth. Sometimes we need to weep and mourn. But it is important to remember that in the end there is the joy of resurrection. In the end there is reason to celebrate. So do not be afraid.