

A SALUTE AT THE GRAVESIDE

William Barclay was a Scottish author, radio and television personality, Church of Scotland minister, and professor of divinity and biblical criticism at the University of Glasgow.

He once related a story, told to him by a friend, of a lonely old man named Thomas, who worshiped in the church where the friend did.

Thomas had outlived all his friends and hardly anyone knew him. When he died, Barclay's friend had the feeling that there would be no one to go to the funeral, so he decided to go. He wanted someone to follow the old man to his final resting place.

It was a rainy, miserable day. No one else came to the church at the appointed time of the funeral – just the minister, Barclay's friend, and, of course, the body of Thomas. When the hearse reached the cemetery, a soldier was waiting at the gate. He appeared to be an officer in the military, but on his raincoat were no rank stripes or badges.

The soldier came to the graveside for the ceremony. When it was over, he stepped forward, and before the open grave he swept his hand to a salute that might have been given to a president or a king.

Barclay's friend walked away from the grave with the soldier. As they paused for a moment, looking back toward the grave as the dirt was being thrown onto the coffin, the wind blew the soldier's raincoat open, revealing the shoulder badges of a brigadier general.

"Perhaps you are wondering what I am doing here," he said. "Years ago, Thomas was my Sunday school teacher. I was a wild boy, and a sore trial to him. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or will be to old Thomas. Today I had to come to salute him at the end."

There are at least three reactions to that story:

1. What a remarkable tribute to the life of old Thomas, who – as far as the world might think – accomplished little during his sojourn on the earth. But his investment in this one boy (and, most likely, in many others) reaped dividends to be shared for generations to come.
2. While the soldier's presence at the funeral and the salute he rendered were heartwarming, it was sad that he never seized the opportunity to tell Thomas while he lived what he had meant to him.
3. For each of us, leaders in Life Care and Century Park, we've been given positions made possible because someone believed in us and sowed seeds in our future through their time and encouragement. Let's not wait until they die to tell them. What happiness it can bring them!

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy (Psalm 126:5 NIV).

– Beecher Hunter