

The Unseen Guest

More than 1,000 people packed the gymnasium of the Central Middle School in Wartburg, Tennessee, Friday afternoon to pay their respects to a fallen corrections officer, Wayne Thomas (Cotton) Morgan, who was gunned down on the Roane County Courthouse lawn last Tuesday in the escape of an inmate of the Brushy Mountain Correctional Complex.

Law enforcement officers from several states filled the bleachers on both sides of the gym, and half of the rows of chairs placed on the gym floor. Family members were seated in the front rows, just a few feet from the American flag-draped casket of the Purple Heart-decorated veteran of the Vietnam War. Friends and acquaintances from the surrounding mountains and valleys came out to say goodbye to a neighbor who gave special meaning to that term. Members of the staff of Life Care Center of Morgan County, where Morgan was a regular volunteer for the past six years, sat in quiet reflection.

But amidst the throngs of people – those wearing badges, others sitting shoulder to shoulder in folding chairs, and some standing across the back of the room – there was an Unseen Guest. The presence of the Holy Spirit of God was evident in the gospel songs, the preaching of the Word that ended in an altar call, the tributes of other speakers, the reverence of the crowd for a faithful soldier of the cross, and in the eulogy of the Tennessee governor. They had all come to pay their respects to the man who had exalted the name of his Lord throughout his life, and had demonstrated his love for God by his acts of mercy and kindness to those he met.

Governor Phil Bredesen quoted John 15:13, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” And then he added: “Last Tuesday morning, Cotton Morgan lay down his life for his friends.” He urged the assemblage to honor Morgan “by not letting his death stand in the way of good things to come.”

“In Tennessee,” the governor said, “we are blessed with some very special people who strive to leave their piece of the world a little better than they found it. Wayne Thomas (Cotton) Morgan was one of those people.” Earlier this year, when the governor's wife, Andrea Conte, was on a 600-mile walking journey across Tennessee to raise awareness about child sexual abuse, “Cotton Morgan walked with her for 11 miles,” Bredesen said.

“When he awoke on Tuesday morning and got ready for work as we all do every day, he never thought that that day would be his last day with all of us, that on that day he would leave this world behind.” It was then, the governor said, “when a true Tennessee volunteer heard the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

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“As governor,” Bredesen said, “I see the important role Cotton Morgan and his colleagues play in our state.” He praised “the honor and bravery of his precious partner, Larry Harris (who was with Morgan when he was shot).” The comment brought a standing ovation from the audience.

Bredesen told the crowd, “Tennesseans across our state are inspired by the strength this community has shown.”

He presented Morgan’s widow, Viann, with the Tennessee Medal of Valor, honoring her husband posthumously. Following the service, as the crowd slowly filed out of the gymnasium, the singers performed “Precious Memories,” and all had their own private thoughts about this public servant.

Corrections officers carried the coffin about 350 yards from the school to Liberty Cemetery. The graveside service ended with a 21-gun salute, *Taps* and a fly-by from four helicopters.

And when it was all over, what had we who were there witnessed? Through the work of the Unseen Guest, we had seen Jesus Christ, high and lifted up. So, in death, just as in his life, Wayne Morgan was pointing people to his Savior.

--Beecher Hunter