Some Guidance on Planning a Memorial in the Case of Suicide

The winter holiday season is a difficult time to some. They are a time of holiday parties and gatherings. And while these are happy times for those celebrating with friends and family, these are also, as you know, times of painful reflection and depression for some. And as we used to say in the ER "tis the season" meaning an uptick in ODs and suicides.
Being asked to officiate a memorial or gravesite service in the case of suicide is a stressful and awkward task.

When ministering to the family and more specifically planning a memorial service consider the following advice.

Don't "preach someone into heaven." Meaning you probably don't know where their eternal destination is. However, there are times when you know the person well and are able to make that conclusion comfortably. That is the ideal situation because of the obvious latitude it gives you with your message. Knowing their faith and how they lived out their faith can provide you with a degree of confidence regarding that delicate matter. However, unless you know or are told by family then don't assume anything. In other words, don't say they are in heaven and of course don't say they are in hell. Only God knows that definitively.

But don't panic, you can still give a kind, loving message that honors the person's life and comforts the family by letting them know they are cared about. This doesn't preclude giving a gospel message of hope depending on the family situation. It may be viewed positively or negatively. I know many pastors that see memorial services as the best opportunity to give that message of hope. BUT don't lose sight of your task. It's to honor the deceased and comfort the loved ones. That's why planning the service with the family is vital. The service is for them, not us, and we need to honor their wishes. I've done a service where I was instructed by the family to not quote scripture or talk about God. However, they did allow me to say a closing prayer. I respected their wishes and they were pleased with the service. Mission accomplished!
As always, the goal is to prevent suicide in the first place and that's where suicide awareness and intervention training is so important. Please get some basic training in that vital skill. You might get the opportunity to save a life.

One favorite passage I use in memorial services is one of great hope. The hope of eternal life in heaven. This may be appropriate to use and be of great comfort. But again, know your audience and the situation because I believe the Hippocratic oath applies to chaplains too. "Do no harm".

> **(Revelation 21:1-4)** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.* **2** *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* **3** *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.* **4** *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away*."

Remember the 3 primary roles of the chaplain:

- the Chaplain nurtures the living
- the Chaplain cares for the dying
- the Chaplain honors the dead

We are a chaplaincy *team* and by all means reach out, ask questions, and ask for help. That is how we succeed. And finally, in closing I want to thank each of you for stepping up and stepping out in faith to take on this sacred role as chaplains.