

Bible and the Headlines: News You Can Use

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September 24, 2025

One of the highest honors a veteran can receive is to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The iconic feature of this prestigious necropolis is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The marble sarcophagus guarded by the nation's most elite funeral detail is meant to honor the ultimate sacrifice of countless military members whose bodies could not be identified and returned to their families. Some of the stories making headlines show that the drive to honor the graves of unknown people is not only present on the banks of the Potomac, but takes place around the globe.

The e-newsletter for England's University of Huddersfield on August 19th carried the story, "Huddersfield Archaeologists Help To Reveal Namibian Genocide Grave Sites." This report was about the work a forensic team from the university did to shed light on the number of Africans killed during the German occupation of Namibia from 1904-1908. The archeologists, "... used Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) and other techniques to discover the extent of hitherto unknown single and mass graves." The project will insure all graves are clearly marked and not lost to the passage of time.

Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, on August 25th featured, "No Longer Lost': Graves Honoured At Mission Island, But There Is Still More Work to Be Done." The article featured the work of tribal leaders and anthropologists to locate various unmarked burial sites surrounding the original location of Saint Joseph's Mission School. The team "... has mapped 20 pages of names and locations, revealing many unmarked graves, and has identified 70 names of children who never made it home from St. Joseph's." For now, the project is to mark the graves, but the goal is to return the remains to the communities from which the children came.

On September 15th, the Boston Globe proclaimed, "Every Grave Should Have a Name." This opinion piece looks at the findings of the Special Commission on State Institutions whose charter included examining the cemetery records of Massachusetts's mental institutions since the 1800's. The report found, "In some cemeteries, graves were marked with concrete slabs without names... scholars suggest institutions left names off the graves to spare families the shame of having an institutionalized relative." The commission recommended a reclassification of the cemetery records from "medical" to "vital" so that the records can be made available to the public.

Unmarked graves are not a new phenomenon. Jesus used this fact to highlight his point in a sermon. Jesus told his critics, "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it" (Luk 11:44). The remark not only censored the Pharisees it was directed toward, but acknowledged unmarked graves as a blight on a community.

There is another Biblical reference about graves worth mentioning. When Judas attempted to return the money he was paid to betray Jesus, the officials at the Temple would not take his coins since this was blood money. Instead the officials "... decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners" (Matt 27:7). The "foreigners" were people with no family burial plots, and anonymous to the residents of Jerusalem. In this sense, the Potter's Field was the first Tomb of the Unknowns.