

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 4-5, 2016
Luke 7:11-17

“Life from Death”

At some point in life, we will find ourselves in the same place as the women in today’s Old Testament and Gospel lessons (1 Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17): grappling with the reality of death when a loved one is taken from us. Sometimes we are prepared for this and expecting it; other times, we are not. Many of you know first-hand what this looks like and what this feels like, having walked that difficult road of grief and heartache. In both Old Testament and Gospel lessons today, it is widows who have now lost their sons. Having lost their husbands already, they now have lost their sons as well, both of them having died prematurely and far too young. But in both instances, there is life from death! God intervenes in both instances to restore both of these people to life, first through Elijah in the Old Testament lesson and then through Jesus in the Gospel lesson. The good news of resurrection and new life is not limited just to Easter Sunday or even the Easter season. We worship and serve a living Lord Jesus Christ who has brought life and immortality to light. The message for this day, based on the account from Luke’s Gospel of Jesus raising the widow of Nain’s son from death to life, is entitled “Life from Death.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Last Sunday’s Gospel lesson (Luke 17:1-10) was the story of how Jesus cured the centurion’s servant who was ill. Without even speaking a word of healing, the servant was healed and Jesus’ authority was revealed. Now it is not just illness but death itself that challenges Jesus. Will Jesus’ authority extend even this far? The setting for this confrontation is at the city gate of Nain, a town about 25 miles southwest of Capernaum where Jesus healed the centurion’s servant. Two very different processions meet one another there at the city gate, one going out focused on death and one coming in focused on life. The one procession going out carried the body of the son of the widow for burial. We are told that **“a considerable crowd from the town was with her”** (Luke 17:12). They were there to share in her loss and pay their respects, just as we do today. But then what? What happens when the funeral is over and everybody goes home? What happens when that widow goes home to an empty and very quiet house? In reality, the widow was now left destitute because there was no one to support her. In the Biblical world, it was not unheard of for widows literally to starve to death. The next funeral in Nain might well be her own. This grief-stricken procession of mourners is met by the incoming procession led by the Lord Jesus, **“and a great crowd went with him”** (Luke 7:11). The two crowds meet one another, and rather than stand aside politely to allow the funeral procession to pass by, Jesus goes up directly to the widow and her deceased son. Jesus **“had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’”** (Luke 7:13). Literally, his heart went out to her. And then he touched the bier, or open coffin, in which the young man was laid. In doing so, Jesus became ritually unclean because the Law of Moses forbid God’s people from coming into contact with a dead body (Numbers 19:11-13). Jesus did this deliberately and intentionally as only the Son of God can do. While mere humans may be contaminated, Jesus who is true God and true man willingly took upon himself our contamination, our sin, our death. Dying the death that we rightly deserved because of our sin, Jesus consumed death itself. If you will, Jesus was the original “death eater” long before there was Harry Potter. And as such, Jesus fulfilled the words of Isaiah the prophet: **“He will swallow up death forever”** (Isaiah 25:8a). Only the One who has power over death can command it, and it must obey him. And it did obey him: **“‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother”** (Luke 7:14b-15). This is life from death!

Some may say that all of this happened a very long time ago. People then didn’t have the science, technology, and medical expertise that we have today. Some may say that the young man was not really dead – just in some kind of deep sleep or trance. I do not believe this for a moment, and you shouldn’t,

either. The people of Jesus' day were far more familiar with death than we are. It was not isolated and removed from daily life as we are prone to do today. They knew it when they saw it. And the outcome here from what Jesus had done? The people concluded that the Messiah had *not* appeared, but that a great prophet had come and through him, God had visited his people – a prophet like Elijah of old who had raised to life the widow of Zarephath's son. But here's the difference: "... the greatest of the prophets [like Elijah] had restored to lonely women their dead only sons. But *they* had done it with agonies and energies of supplication, wrestling in prayer, and lying outstretched upon the dead; whereas Jesus had wrought that miracle calmly, incidentally, instantaneously, in His own name, by His own authority, with a single word" (*Life of Christ*, by Robert Farrar, as quoted in *Luke: Concordia Classic Commentary Series*, by William F. Arndt. St. Louis: Concordia, 1956; p. 206). Only Jesus can bring life from death. As he said to the widow's son, so he will say to all who trust in him: "Young man/young woman, my beloved child, I say to you, arise." And we will. And that will be our own Easter.

All along life's way there are little deaths and lesser funerals before we ever actually die. We experience sickness and pain. We know disappointment and loss. We find out that we have limitations and are not immortal. If we are wise, we will take these to heart and learn from them. All of these are dress rehearsals for our final breath. And so with the psalmist, we pray: **"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me! O Lord, be my helper!" You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!"** (Psalm 30:9-12). It is only in Jesus, who died and who now lives and reigns to all eternity, that we know death is not the final word. It is only in Jesus that there can be life from death.

My friends, this is the saving truth and the hope for all people that we hold up to the world. As we join Jesus on his mission in daily life, we become aware of the needs of others around us. In all likelihood, one need will be helping those who are struggling with the loss of a loved one: our friends, neighbors, co-workers, even our own family members. This situation could well be living out that fourth mission practice from *Joining Jesus on His Mission*: "What good can we do around here?" In these situations, we are in a very unique position to do good by blessing others who are grieving, even as Jesus blessed the widow of Nain by raising her son. We are not Jesus, and we do not have the power to raise the dead. But the good we can do is point them to Jesus, who loves them and gave his life for them, who alone can bring life from death. God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.