



“Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love. Amen.” (2 John 3) The Word of God for our meditation was read as our Gospel for today, recorded in Luke 7:11-17.

In the name of the LORD of life and death, Jesus Christ, dear fellow living saints.

I remember touching her casket for the last time. She was only 20 years old, mown down in an intersection by a drunk driver. I was a tough high schooler at the time. I wasn’t going to shed any tears there. I had cried plenty when I was alone and I’m not sure my tear ducts had much more to give. I remember fighting back thoughts of why that driver couldn’t have sped through the intersection just a second later. It could have been so different. Instead of what happened, she would have simply exclaimed with a quickly beating heart, “Whoa, did you see that!” Instead what happened stopped her heart and in that moment the hearts of all those who loved her. I remember standing at the casket thinking, “I’m never going to see my sister again.” If you could feel your soul, it’s at that point you feel it drain away to emptiness. I know that most of you have felt that, too. I’ve had the privilege of standing at your side for many of you. If you haven’t, inevitably you will.

The timing for my sister didn’t seem right. But the timing of Jesus in our account was “dead” on. The town of Nain rested on the side of a hill. Nain means “Valley of Beauty.” The landscape would have looked beautiful if the occasion hadn’t been so ugly. A widow was mourning the death of her son. Now without husband and without a male heir, it appeared as though God were against her and had completely abandoned her.

The city was surrounded by a wall that had one gate. As Jesus led his crowd of followers up the path toward the city, a funeral procession was leaving town by the same narrow road. Picture two human parades silently slipping past each other. The one with the coffin was led by a widow grieving for her only son. If you’ve seen grief, you’ll have no trouble imagining her. If you’ve seen death, you can picture her son. Leading the other parade was the Author of life.

When Jesus saw the widow, “his heart went out to her.” It was not her first sorrowing walk down this hill. Not her first funeral. As he watched her pass, he spoke a promise of things to come. “Don’t cry,” he said. Only it wasn’t the same weak sentence I speak when I can’t think of anything else. When this One orders an end to tears, there is something behind the command to stop a heart, or to start one. There’s a look on his face that would be outrageous on any other: “I can fix this.”

But his next words aren’t to the woman. Having stopped the procession with a forbidden touch on the coffin, he spoke to the young man lying dead. Mourners often do that. They bid a last farewell, express their own sorrow at the parting of the loved one, or even confess some wrong they have done. But the dead don’t hear them. Before us today, we have words of a different sort. With the tone of a teacher telling students to sit or the authority of a mom telling kids to get out of the rain, Jesus commanded the dead boy *not to be dead*. And the boy obeyed. Cold skin warmed. Stiff limbs moved. White cheeks flushed. And Jesus “gave him back to his mother.” And all who saw it spoke better than they knew: “God has come to help his people.”

And so members and guests of Immanuel, “Don’t cry.” Really? We hear this beautiful, touching, powerful story and there is a part of us that says, “What about me?” I’ve often thought about that reaction when I’ve gone to the hospital and tried to encourage someone with the account of Jesus healing the paralytic or one of his other miracles. I sometimes wonder if you’re thinking, “Then why doesn’t he heal me?” Or when I’ve tried to encourage someone who lost a loved one with the account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Is there a part of you that thinks, “Then why doesn’t he raise my loved one? Why doesn’t he touch the casket of my sister or brother or mom or dad or daughter or son or friend?” I have to admit that there is a part of me that thinks those things sometimes. It’s at times of grief like that when God can seem as cold as the casket in front of us and as aloof as a God who is far away.

Friends, those thoughts are the seeds of unbelief. And unbelief needs to be beaten down and killed with a stick lest it lead us to a place so horrible that temporal death seems like a vacation. It needs to be beaten...and it was – every sinful bit of it. At times when God seems like he doesn't care, we need to see his heart in an account like this. He wore it on his sleeve. His heart went out to the woman. He raised her son. But we need more than that. That son lived to die another day. So do we. Jesus needed to nip death in the bud once and for all. He saw our sin and unbelief and his heart went out not just to the woman, but to the world...to you. He took action...he took our place on the funeral pall.

He came to Bethlehem, wearing barn rags and hearing sheep crunch. Suckling milk and shivering against the cold. All of divinity content to cocoon itself in an eight-pound body and to sleep on a cow's supper. Growing up in Nazareth, he made deadlines and paid bills. Ministering in Galilee, he recruited direct reports and revealed himself as God. In Jerusalem, he took on our sin and unbelief on a cross and suffered real death so that we'd never have to. More than that, he went to a grave. Not as a visitor, but as a corpse. And as our account shows, Jesus is the only one who knows the way out – on Easter morning he burst out. *God has come to help his people!*

And so, "Don't cry." What Jesus spoke at the bedside of Jairus' daughter is true for your loved ones as it is for you, "She is not dead, but asleep." Luther liked to talk about the "light sleep of death." He would talk about the fact that there are people who sleep so soundly that you could call them 10 times before they wake up. Maybe you know some in your family like that. But the dead hear that lone word of Jesus and wake up. The moment he speaks that one word, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" They hear it and listen. And so Luther said that we sleep much more soundly in bed than we do in the churchyard!

In Jesus the general principle that dead people stay dead now has an asterisk beside it, one outrageous footnote. The "firstfruits" appeared on the human tree, with the promise of more "fruit" to follow. It is Christ who walked through death and emerged alive and smiling on the other side, who pushed open a door closed for centuries and left it open behind him. He alone holds the floor on the matter of our mortality. "Because I live, you also will live."

And so what does this account have to say to us? Simply this: Faith trusts that whether my loved one sits up in the casket or not, I know that he is sitting up in heaven and will one day rise on the Last Day because of Jesus. I can stand at my sister's graveside with trust in that hope for her – you can, too. I can trust the words I too will be waiting to hear: "Young man, I say to you, get up!"

And so at a funeral, cry because you'll miss your loved ones. But don't cry because you'll never see them again. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the Last Day, Jesus will speak those powerful words that he spoke to the widow, "Don't cry." At that point, the command will seem silly...because you won't be able to – he will have wiped every tear away. As the hymn writer so beautifully put it:

**"Lord, how shall I thank you rightly? I am saved eternally by your life and death for me.
Let me not regard you lightly, but on you in faith depend, praising you, my heavenly friend.
Joy, oh, joy beyond all gladness, Christ has done away with sadness!
Hence all sorrow and repining, for the Sun of grace is shining!"**

This is what your God says to you and he doesn't lie to you.

"The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things! I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. Amen." (Psalm 118:16-17)