

Sermon Reading: Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

Sermon Theme: Jesus Dries Our Tears

There are some situations in life that, in the moment, you just don’t know what to say or how to respond. That’s how I felt Monday morning when I heard the news about Clint and Jed Vanderwey. What are you supposed to say when you find out a middle aged dad goes up with his 16 year old son in the plane to have it crash and kill both of them? What can you say? It can feel like whatever you do say either doesn’t help or comes up short. How do you respond when someone asks that simple, yet, oh-so-difficult question, “Why?”

I wonder if the crowd was thinking the same thing when they are walking out of the town gates of Nain. The funeral time had been set, the burial site is ready, and the town gathers to give their last respects and, in some way, comfort to this woman who not only has had to bury her husband but now also her own son. It’s not hard for us to imagine what they were saying in Jesus’ day because it’s strikingly similar to what we face today.

So what do you say when someone asks, “Why?” Why do the bright lights go out and the dark ones stay lit? Why does someone who—humanly speaking—has their whole life ahead of them seem to have that time cut short? Why does tragedy strike on top of tragedy? Again, these are questions that maybe were asked by the crowd at the town of Nain. At the same time, these are questions still asked today.

Maybe part of the reason we don’t know what to say at death is because the truth hurts. Death shows us a truth that our sinful nature does not want to hear or see. It

shows you that death does not care about age. We say things like, “Death can come at any moment,” but it takes an accident like what happened with Clint and Jed to really drive that point home. Death, it doesn’t care about one’s personal potential or how bright of a future the world might see the person having, it will end life all the same. Death shows me that I am personally responsible and accountable for my actions. Not in the *karma*—do bad things and bad things will happen to you—sort of way. But the truth that “nobody is perfect” doesn’t condone or excuse sinful action but condemns us all. Because I am a sinner—because I’m not loving, caring, good enough—death awaits me. That is the consequence of my sin—of not being enough—death.

Maybe part of the reason we don’t know what to say is because we know this is not how it is supposed to be! We want there to be some other answer. We want there to be a more significant reason, because, otherwise, life and death seems almost trivial. It shows me how fragile, temporary, and short this life really is.

So what do you say in the face of death? You will hear things like, “Remember the time that you had with them...hold onto the memories...he/she was such a good, kind person.” Or you hear less than truthful things like, “They will always be with you...they are looking down on you...” But you also know how less than helpful those sayings are. You know the memories can never replace the physical presence as great of a blessing it is from God to have those memories of those we love. You know that just thinking that person is there doesn’t actually mean they are. If anything, it accentuates how one feels their loved one should be present, but are not.

But what we might fail to see is how he hides himself behind those nice-sound and sentimental thoughts. He dresses himself up with half-truths and convincing lies. He disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). And he does it to direct your eyes backward. The devil wants you to keep your eyes in the past, because then you are focused on the “should of, would of, could of’s” that are, at best, less than helpful and, even worse, the devil uses them to bury you in guilt—“Look at all that you messed up with!”—so that you won’t look up for help. He wants you to focus on the loss, the things that could have been and things that will be missed because then you are left grappling and wrestling for answers that aren’t going to show up. He does this because the more that we wrestle with the things that we don’t know, the more easily one can be convinced that God does not have your best interests in mind; God is withholding his love from you. “Why should

you love him, when he seems to have pulled his love from you?” the devil asks. “Why should you trust him, when it seems like it doesn’t really help?” The devil doesn’t just want you and me to trip and fall into sin; that’s peanuts to him. His greatest joy and prize is to convince you to pull yourself away from Jesus and that you don’t need him. And so the devil works so that we might be swallowed in emotions, overwhelmed with despair, filled-up with anger so that we do not see clearly and trust what God gives.

So you are in that crowd with the widow walking to the gravesite. What do you say? I don’t know if any of us would say what Jesus does. It sounds so unloving, insensitive, even uncaring. But that’s far from the truth. When Jesus says, “Don’t cry,” he’s not telling her it is wrong for her to cry. It makes complete sense that she is. Her tears—among so many other things—show that recognition that this is not how it is supposed to be! When Jesus says, “Don’t cry,” Jesus is inviting this woman to see with clear eyes the one who wipes away her tears.

Jesus goes up to the bier that the dead body is being carried on, touches it, and says, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” Because of the religious law of Jesus’ people, being around death was not something taken lightly. More often the people would be very careful to not come into contact with death if they could avoid it. But Jesus doesn’t avoid it. Jesus moves past the confusing emotions and doesn’t allow himself to be distracted by sentimentality. Emotions are always changing. Sentimentality too often clouds the truth and the facts. Jesus shows this widow the truth that there is only one way to victory over death and to have life: it’s through him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus touches death in order to bring life. After hearing the word, receiving the touch, the dead one sits up and begins to speak. One who was most certainly dead is brought back to live. Raising this young man from the dead gives a glimpse of this hope that death is not all-powerful. Death is not the end for God’s people. Death can be defeated. Death is powerless in the face of the one who is the Life.

What Jesus does here is a preview to what he will accomplish on Easter morning. Once again death would not chase Jesus off. Yes, he asked that his Father take that cup from him if there was another way to save you. But that was not the Father’s will. The only accepted payment for sin is death! And so Jesus, who is the Life, willingly goes to die. Yes, it looked like death had again won when Jesus breathes his last and is buried in the tomb. But, Paul asks, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). Not here. The power of

death is sin and Jesus paid the price for sin with his holy and precious blood so that death's power has been removed. The sting of death is the Law and that sting has been removed with Jesus' perfect life and innocent death that he serves in your place. With his rising from the dead, God shows Jesus has won the victory for us. Death is no longer the end. It's the doorway through which God's people walk in order to be welcomed into their Father's embrace to be with him forever in heaven where every tear of sadness has been wiped from their eyes.

What Jesus does for that widow and her son, he continues to do for you and for me. In sin, we are as lifeless as that dead body on the funeral bier; we were dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). That is, until Jesus stops, reaches out through time and space, and touches you with the water that touches your head in baptism. In your baptism you were put to death with Jesus on the cross where he dies for all sin in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:4). Yes, you were dead, but with Jesus' word and his touch, you live. And Jesus continues to do this. When you come to the Lord's Supper, Jesus reaches out with his body and blood and the bread and the wine to touch your hands, touch your lips, embrace you with his love and give you a renewed forgiven life with him. You were dead in sin, but now are made alive in Jesus.

These are not just nice sounding things; this is the truth. No, we don't know all the answer to all of the questions. God doesn't expect us to. No, we aren't always going to understand everything that God does or chooses not to do. How unsearchable are his judgments! But what we do know are God's promises that his Word is powerful and effective. He promises that in baptism your sins will not be counted against you because you are his child. As people of God, you do have something to say. Point to the one who dries our tears and gives us assurance in his Word that nothing can separate us from his love. He's that same Jesus who promises that He is the resurrection and the life, and all who believe in him will live even though they die. Amen.