

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: Power in the Face of Death

As long as there’s a chance, there’s hope. The odds are ridiculous for winning the Powerball jackpot, but all it takes is having the right numbers once—there’s a chance. The team is down by 20 points heading into the final quarter; but, there’s still a chance. He’s diagnosed with terminal cancer; but, as long as he is breathing, there’s a fighting chance. But soon the buzzer sounds and no amount of griping and what-if’s will change the final score. Sadly if cancer wins, no matter how bravely he fought, in the end he lost. That’s part of what makes death difficult, why so many try to avoid it all costs—even speaking about it—because once death comes, that’s the end. You won’t be spending any more time with him. You won’t have any more of those conversations you dearly loved with her. There’s now a gaping hole in your life where someone once was. Death makes us uncomfortable and leaves us feeling powerless. And we as God’s people do ourselves and others a disservice if we do not point to and share the one who gives us power in the face of death.

We aren’t told exactly how much time has passed, but soon after the healing of the centurion’s servant Jesus goes to the town of Nain. With him comes a large crowd of people along with his disciples who possibly had a little extra pep in their step and conversations. It was an exciting time to be a follower of Jesus as you wait for Jesus’ next miracle or listen for what Jesus might say next.

How quickly that probably changed when they saw what was coming out of Nain. You know how it is when we see that funeral procession headed to the cemetery: we slow down and even stop as they pass by. The entire mood changes, even if it was for a moment. Being in the presence of death sucks out the energy; it demands reverence. As was custom in Jesus’ day, the closest relative leads the procession: it’s a single woman,

who is about to bury her only son—a young man who probably hadn't been married yet. To make it all the more difficult is the fact that these were sadly familiar steps for her. She already had buried her husband so all those emotions come back. And now she is all alone. And so she weeps. Sure, she has this large crowd from the town who is supporting her. They were aware of her situation, what that all meant, and they wanted to be there for her. But they knew and she knew it would never fill that gaping hole in her life.

As the crowd with Jesus watched the procession it's not hard to imagine how they may have felt. We know how we are when someone is weeping, crying, and you hear the pain in their voice and see their tears. It makes us uncomfortable. Your heart goes out to them; you wish you could do something. But, instead, all too often you're left speechless. Really, what can you do? Then there's that uncomfortable feeling trying to figure out how you can avoid further embarrassing yourself or embarrassing them.

Among those following the widow and paying their last respects for the dead, you may be heard things like, "This poor thing! Wasn't it bad enough that she lost her husband and, now, her son? He's so young; he had his whole life ahead of him. He was such a good guy; so loving and caring for his mom. Who's going to take care of her now? Eventually it will get better for her; at least she had that time with him that she was able to enjoy." We can imagine such things because we have heard or said similar thoughts at funerals we have attended or when someone has passed.

But no one is talking to Jesus. No one runs up to him to ask him to do something. No one is begging him to have mercy as so many had done before. There's no healing to be done here. The young man is dead. It's done.

Different people deal with death in different ways. It's becoming more common today that instead of having a funeral service, one has a memorial service instead: a celebration of life. Watch almost any funeral service on TV shows or in a movie and there will be a portion of the service where people are invited forward to say nice things about the person and share happy memories of the dearly departed. Another tries to deal with death by treating it as not a big deal; it's simply the cycle of life—you die and there's nothing. Still others deal with death by saying things like, "They were such a good person, they were so kind and caring," or it's, "They live on in your memory," or, there's the comment on how nice the flowers are because you don't know what else to say.

But as much comfort as those phrases, nice-sounding things, the memories give, it comes up short. The flowers die in the coming days and weeks. Those nice words people say at the funeral become less common and reassuring as time goes by. For all those eulogies and memorials, it was nice to hear, but now what? Yes, you remember

the person who died, but do you really think that just the memory is going to be a substantial substitute for the physical presence of the loved one? No, you know it won't; but what are you supposed to say?

Death is romanticized to be this beautiful thing to avoid how jarring and how painful it is to have a loved one ripped from this world. The eulogies are in place to help blunt the stabbing of God's Law while trying to avoid saying or at least downplaying the truth that no matter how kind and caring that person was, because they died they were a sinner. Having only a memorial service keeps us looking in the past, it holds us back when instead God wants us looking ahead to what death means for me as an individual. And, even worse, it keeps you from looking to Christ.

Understand me correctly, I'm not saying that those things *in and of themselves* are wrong. Of course we enjoy the memories of our loved ones. Of course we celebrate the life that God had given to them and the blessings, we pray, they were to us. But everything has its proper time and place. And we can't enjoy those thing to their fullest until we face the truth of what death is. Death, we don't like talking about it, it seems so morbid to bring it up, it makes us uncomfortable because deep down we know that it isn't right. Death is unnatural. Even someone who dies at a ripe old age of 100 years old, that was never God's intention when he created the world—he created us to live, not die. Death forces us to see that something is not right with me because we all know that we are going to have face death ourselves. Because we are not always loving, caring, because we do sin and are sinful, we die. It's that simple. Dress it up how you like, avoid it as much as you want, it still doesn't change what death is. If we stop at commenting on the flowers or the type of person the individual was, then at best we do something nice while sacrificing giving someone true and real comfort that is found in Christ. We are giving them a stick of gum which tastes nice for a little while, but holding back from what they really need which is a hearty meal for their starving soul.

No one asked Jesus for any help because they probably assumed there was nothing he could do for that young man of Nain. But when Jesus sees the woman weeping, he has compassion on her. He walks right up to her, meets her on her level, and tells her, "Do not cry." Jesus is not scolding her for crying at the death of her son—there would come a time when Jesus would cry at the death of his friend Lazarus. Do not cry, he says, because he is going to do something that will take her tears away.

No one asked Jesus to say anything over the dead body. He didn't know the young man. But Jesus does the unthinkable and touches the platform carrying the dead body. And when Jesus speaks Death has to listen and is forced to release its powerful hold on the young man. "**Young man, I say to you, get up.**" Jesus who is the Resurrection and the Life calls and the one who was dead is given life. Healing the sick is one thing, making

the lame walk, giving sight to someone born blind and hearing to the deaf is incredible. But to give life is completely different. In a place that should have been hopeless, Jesus gives real hope. In a place where there was little to no comfort, Jesus wipes away a mother's tears and gives her peace. In a place where there seemed like there was nothing to look forward to, Jesus shows us there is more so that we too, when facing death, would have confidence and peace. In Jesus we see power in the face of Death.

That same Jesus does the unthinkable for you: he leaves his throne of glory to take on flesh and blood and live among sinners like you and me. And instead of avoiding death, he willingly goes to the cross to pay the debt your sin owed and to die. But even then, death did not win. Jesus gave up his spirit only to take it back up again when he rose on Easter morning. Death has been swallowed up in victory, thanks be to God (1 Corinthians 15:54). That risen and living Lord who defeated death comes to you to reassure you he knows that it hurts when you someone you love dies. But sadness need not drown you because Jesus lives. It's only natural to have a fear of death. But fear need not overtake us because death has been defeated. Jesus reminds you, "When you were baptized you were united with me and my death. You died with me and so you have been freed from sin. That means sins and sin's curse, death, have no power over you. Just as I was raised from the dead, so in baptism you have been raised with me to a new life. Death is not the end for you. In fact, since have already died once with me, you won't die again. No, you fall asleep in my name. And when you close your eyes the last time on this earth, I will wake you up wiping every tear from those eyes so that you see clearly your eternal home with me."

Instead of stopping at pointing to the flowers, point to the fact that as a baptized child of God sins aren't held against you when you die. Instead of only pointing to the good person's actions, point to how Christ fed them with his body and blood in the Lord's Supper forgiving their sins and keeping them in the true faith until life everlasting. Instead of focusing on the good life they used to have, point to the eternal life they currently have with Jesus in heaven. For God's people, as Paul said, "To live is Christ and to die is gain." Until Christ calls you home, live in the freedom of forgiveness that is yours to the glory of God's name sharing this Good News with your neighbor. Live with the confidence that to die is gain because in Jesus you have one who has power in face of death. Amen.