

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 7:11-17: "Death, Meet Life."
September 15/16, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, You sent Your Son to be made flesh, that by His death He might atone for our sins and deliver us from eternal death: We pray, confirm in our hearts the hope that our Lord Jesus Christ, who with but a word raised the widow's son, in like manner will raise us on the last day and grant us eternal life; through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 162)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Soon afterward [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a great crowd went with Him. As He drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." / Then He came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. / Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited His people!" And this report about Him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2Tim. 1:10), dear fellow redeemed:

The town of Nain still exists. It sits among rolling hills not far from the Sea of Galilee. If you visited at the right time of year, you could find red poppies growing on the slopes of the hills. It would be a pleasant place to stop for a while and enjoy the beauty of the area. The word "Nain" means just that—a charming or beautiful place. Traveling south from Capernaum where He healed a Roman centurion's servant, Jesus decided to stop at this little town. His disciples and the crowd with Him probably thought it was a nice place to take a rest.

The arrival of a big crowd would have typically brought excitement to Nain. But not today. Today was a sad day. The people of the town joined a distraught widow who mourned the death of her only son, a young man in the prime of his life. A thousand unanswerable questions ran through the mind of this poor woman: What would she do now? Who would provide for her? Why did God let this happen—first her husband and then her son?

I

It was a sad scene. We have witnessed scenes like this in our own lives. Some of us have felt the sadness this woman felt. It is a rare person who does not have to face the death of loved ones at a young age. The longer we live, the closer death gets to us. Death takes our grandparents and parents, and then it comes to us. One Lutheran pastor described the reality of death in this way, "The whole earth is a graveyard, and the whole race of humanity a funeral procession." But it is worse than that. He writes, "We don't simply *follow* the dead when we walk behind a coffin; we carry death in ourselves and hasten to our own graves" (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 577).

What does it mean that "we carry death in ourselves"? It means that we carry the germ of death inside. We have been infected with sin, even from the moment of our conception. We are something like the tire with a nail in it. It can run for a while, but eventually it goes flat. We can live with the thorn of sin for a time, but eventually our bodies give out. The Apostle Paul states that because of sin in our bodies, "*our outer self—our physical life—is wasting away*" (2Cor. 4:16).

If you have an injury, you let it rest until it heals. If there is an infection in your body, the doctor prescribes an antibiotic. If your weight is causing health problems, you try to eat better and exercise. But what can you do about sin? Some people act like it isn't even there, or they try to cover it up. They point out the bad in others, but not in themselves. Some feel the burden of sin and try to make up for it. They volunteer and go out of their way to help others, not so much because they feel love for their neighbors, but because they hope it will look good to God. But no matter what people try to do about sin—ignoring it, covering it up, trying to make amends for it—they end up in the same place. They can't escape death.

There is nothing more sobering than death. No scientist or strong man has successfully defeated it. All attempts have failed. Still, human beings boast continuously about what they have accomplished. Look at our power! Look at our ingenuity! Look at our social progress! Look at our success! And yet death marches on and fells the world's heroes one after the other. The old 18th century saying suggests that nothing is as certain as "death and taxes," but a person might be able to evade taxes. He cannot evade death.

If nothing else woke up the world to its own pride and vanity and weakness, it seems that death would do the job. The universal problem of death should make everyone seek God and His mercy. For those who don't, there isn't much comfort to be had at their funeral, or as it is commonly called, their "celebration of life." Loved ones share memories and funny stories. Everyone cheers the deceased for "doing things his way." They remember him saying that he didn't always make the best choices, but nobody had as much fun as he did. And they imagine the deceased now being "in a better place"—often described as a perfect golf course or a prime fishing spot.

These are the ways unbelievers try to lessen the sting of death. But their self-comfort is empty. The reality is that the person they loved is gone and isn't coming back. Death won again. Death always wins. Well, *almost* always.

II

When the two crowds met at the gates of Nain, it must have been awkward. The townspeople were mourning the death of one of their own. The crowd with Jesus was looking for a place to

have rest and refreshment. The visitors would not have been greeted with welcoming smiles. They may have been met with frowns, since they were getting in the way of a very personal ceremony.

But instead of stepping aside, Jesus stepped right up to the grieving woman. Gently He said to her, *“Do not weep.”* But who was this? Had anyone seen Him before? Didn't He understand what was going on? Jesus did not offer an explanation. He turned from the woman and touched the open coffin. Those carrying the dead man stood still. They didn't realize it, but death was about to be stopped in its tracks too. Jesus said, *“Young man, I say to you, arise.”*

If there was any delay between Jesus' words and the rising up of the man, who would have believed it could happen? But immediately the dead man sat up and began to speak! Then a mother's tears of anguish became tears of joy. Here was her son, alive! But who was this strange Man?

This Man was the Son of God incarnate, and He was on a mission. He came to deliver sinners from the universal curse. He came to provide the solution for sin. That solution was a life of innocence and the shedding of His divine blood. The Living One, the Lord of Life, had to die, so that that the dying ones, slaves of death, might live. But it was one thing to raise a dead man to life. Could Jesus raise Himself? The answer came on the third day after His death. To the surprise of everyone—both His enemies and His friends—Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning.

Jesus' victory over death was not just for Him. Before all this took place He had declared, *“Because I live, you also will live” (Jn. 14:19)*. He said that His life would be not only His, but His disciples' also. And how could they be assured of this life even while their bodies declined and they faced their death? Their assurance of life was their baptism into Christ. Baptism is your assurance too. The Letter to the Romans says, *“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (6:4-5)*.

“We shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” This certainty is given us in baptism. In our baptism, we are joined with our Savior; we become part of His body. That means His victory is our victory. His life is our life. Because we are in Christ, death can no more prevail against us than it prevailed against Him. This is why we can laugh at death even as it seems to be winning. We can say along with the believers of Old and New Testament times, *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (Hos. 13:14; 1Cor. 15:55)*.

The poet John Donne wrote an excellent poem on this theme. He starts by addressing death:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

He says that death will not defeat him. And why is that? It is because of Jesus' resurrection, and the life He delivered to us in our baptism. Donne concludes his poem with these confident words:

One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

"Death shalt die" because the Life-Winner has triumphed over it. Death does its terrible work as long as there is sin in the world. But Jesus will soon return. Then the shadow of death will be dispelled in His bright light, and death will trouble us no more. This is our only comfort when we lay loved ones to rest in the tomb. We bury them with the confidence that their stay in the tomb is only temporary. To Jesus, they are only sleeping, and He can wake them with a word as easily as He raised the young man of Nain.

Death is all around us, and it is in us. But Jesus is in us and with us too, and He is stronger than death. When death takes a fellow child of God away from us, or when death comes for us, we can say with all boldness, "**Death, Meet Life.**" Death cannot harm our souls, which are safely in our Lord's hands. He has even caused death to serve His purpose of delivering our souls to eternal life. It is in this bold confidence that we can sing with the hymnist,

I thank thee, death, thou leadest me
To that true life where I would be.
So cleansed by Christ, I fear not death.
Lord Jesus, strengthen Thou my faith. (ELH #530, v. 2)

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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