

“An Ally At The Gate”

Luke 7:11-17

June 6, 2010

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

You've noticed by now that the color on the altar has been changed to green for the season of Pentecost. Green represents life. While the first half of the church year deals with the life of Jesus, the second half - the season of Pentecost - is all about the life of His body, the church. Therefore, it is ironic that on the first Sunday in which we emphasize life, the Gospel reading is all about death. Perhaps this is appropriate. Maybe we really don't know how to deal with life until we know how to handle death.

The account is about a woman from a small town named Nain. She is in a funeral procession for her only son. Her grief was unimaginable.

But that was not her only problem. Without a husband and now, having lost her only son, she had lost her only means of support. Her present life was in shambles.

Her future was bleak, as well. Since property was handed down from father to son and the family name was carried on by the son, she was now losing her identity and her place in the community and the nation. Her future seemed hopeless. Death does that.

Death affect us in the same way. It brings terrible grief into our lives, even in those cases when a person is old or ill and is expected to die. The death of a son or daughter or a loved one who died accidentally is even worse. The pain and the sadness are both very real and often difficult to bear. Death can destory our present lives and ruin our futures.

So, we try to delay death with all sorts of drugs and medical procedures. We grasp to hold on to life. We may try to hide death or ignore it. Cremation is becoming more popular. I know that cost is involved in making this decision, but I also wonder if cremation also allows us not to have see a dead body and admit the reality of death. Many people are opting out of funerals, either having them or attending them. They don't want to be reminded that they, too, will die. Some have replaced

traditional funerals with “celebrations of life”. It almost seems like if we don’t mention death, we won’t have to admit the fact that death has occurred.

None of our stalling tactics work. None of our denials of death really help. None of our ignoring is ultimately successful. Death stalks us like a wild animal seeking its prey. And death always wins. “A prominent member of a medical faculty used to address his classes with a statement to the effect that, ‘With all the progress in medical science, the mortality rate remains the same. One death for every live birth.’” (CPR, Vol. 20, Part 3, p.9)

God’s Word gives us the theological reason for this observable fact. It is quite simple “The wages of sin is death.” Death is not a natural part of an evolutionary system. Death is a deliberate punishment by a holy God for anyone who turns from His will. That includes everyone for the Scriptures say, “For there is no difference. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Since all have sinned, all will die. We cannot prevent this, avoid this, or stop this. Our only hope is in someone who is stronger than death.

In our lesson for today, Jesus and his disciples encounter this funeral procession at the gate of the town. Passing through the gate was symbolic of the reality of death. The young man was being taken from the town – the land of the living - because he was really dead and to go to the place of the dead to be buried. But this young man had an ally at the gate during this most important time.

Jesus stops the procession. He has compassion on the widow for the pain and suffering which death has caused her. He tells her, “Do not weep!” She must have thought he was crazy. Why shouldn’t she weep? Death had robbed her of her only son, her livelihood, and her hope for the future. She had every right to weep. But Jesus was not giving her a command to bottle up useless emotions. He was giving her a promise that there would soon be no reason for weeping.

Jesus then takes death on. He touches the the coffin. He cares not about the impropriety of doing so. Nor does he care about making Himself ceremonially unclean by having physical contact with a corpse. He is there to overcome death. He speaks a simple word, “Young man, I say to you,

arise.” Immediately, the power of the word of the Son of God overcomes death and brings that young man back to life. The young man sits up and begins talking and Jesus gave him, alive, back to his mother.

We are in the same position as that widow of Nain and her dead son. We encounter death for our loved ones and will experience death for ourselves. We come to the very gate of death. This brings weeping and great sadness, no matter how hard we try to ignore it, repress it, or “be brave” about it. Sometimes people tell us, “Don’t cry” because they see it as a sign of weakness or because it makes them uncomfortable. God tells us, “Don’t cry!” because he promises to overcome death.

We have an ally at the gate of death: Jesus Christ. In our Gospel reading, the death of an only son was the problem, In our case, the death of an only Son is the answer. God’s only Son, Jesus Christ, came into this world and had compassion on all sinners. Although death is a punishment for sin, God takes no delight in the death of sinners. He wishes for sinners to live.

Jesus took on death for all humanity. He doesn’t care how inappropriate it might seem for the eternal Son of God to experience death. He doesn’t care how impure death might be for the holy Son of God. The Scriptures say, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” (2 Cor. 5:21) Jesus resolutely takes on the sin of the whole world and goes to the cross to take the divine punishment for that death-causing sin.

Jesus conquers death with His death. As simple words from the Son of God overcame death for the widow’s son, so simple words from the Son of God overcome death for all humanity: “It is finished!” With those words, the debt of sin had been paid, rendering the cause of death powerless. From Jesus’ death, life came forth – not only His own, three days, later – but for everyone who have a relationship with Him by faith.

As Jesus touched the coffin of the young man of Nain, so Jesus will someday touch your coffin, my coffin, and all the coffins of all the people who died in faith. He will say, “Young man, young woman, old man, old woman, child, I say to you, arise!” And we will! We will sit up, speak,

and be totally alive. And Jesus will give us to our father – our Heavenly Father – to live in His presence for all eternity.

Victory over death cannot help but bring forth a reaction. It did for all of the people at that funeral in Nain. It brought forth joy from the man's mother over his resurrection from the dead. It brought forth fear from the people. They were in awe because they realized they were in the presence of God who alone has the power over life and death. It brought forth praise as the people glorified God. And it brought forth a report from the lips of the people as they spread the story of Jesus throughout all of Judea and the entire surrounding country.

With all of our technology today, maybe we've lost the capacity to be amazed any more like the people of Nain were. Perhaps, having heard the story so often, we take it for granted. But should our reaction to Jesus' power over our death be any less than the reaction of the people of Nain?

What sheer joy is ours whenever we are with brother or sister in the faith when they die or even as we ourselves approach death. We know for certain that, as Jesus raised the young man from death to life, he will resurrect our bodies to life eternal with him in heaven.

Yet, at the same time, should we not also experience fear and awe every time we enter this sanctuary? We are in the presence of the One who has the power over life and death. Is that not an awesome thing? Does this not bring forth praise from our lips as we gather together in this place? We have life as a gift from God. And even though we experience death, death cannot ruin our lives or our future. As Jesus said to Martha at the death of her brother, Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) How can we ever stop praising God for this exciting future?

Should not this bring forth a report of this news from our lips to the people in our community, state, and nation? We have the solution to the one problem that faces every human being who ever lives – death. We can provide what everyone is looking for – life that never ends. So many of our problems come as a result of death – avoiding death, mourning death, and experiencing death. And

we know Him who is the resurrection and the life. Tell everyone you know about this, especially when they are experiencing the death of a loved one or are approaching death themselves.

Someone once said, "It's not what you know, but who you know." Nowhere is this more true than when we confront death. As we approach the gates of death, it matters not that we can explain the meaning of death, the cause of death, or the reason for death. We will still die. Yet we have an Ally at the gates of death, Jesus Christ, who has undergone death Himself and has come back to life in order to give life. He will touch our graves and the graves of all who died in the faith, call us back to life, and then give us life that never ends. Rejoice! Be in awe! Praise the Lord! Tell everyone you know. Death has been swallowed up in victory, a victory that is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.