

9.16.2018 Trinity 16 (Luke 7:11-17)

*“And it came to pass the day after, that Jesus went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and much people. Now when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and much people of the city was with her” (Luke 7:11-12).*

Can you picture it? Can you picture these two great crowds approaching one another at the gate of the city? One was a lively crowd led by Jesus. In it you find Him, His disciples, and a large group of curious and excited people. The other was a crowd filled with intense grief, led by a widow and the men who carried her dead son. Jesus, and the energetic crowd that He led, were approaching the crowd led by this poor widow, who had already buried her dead husband, and was now mourning the death of her only son. As we picture this scene, it's easy to imagine the kind of hush that fell over the lively crowd that accompanied Jesus as they recognized a funeral procession was coming toward them.

In that day, much like today, the custom when meeting a funeral procession was to step aside as a sign of respect for the procession of the dead, and in the Jewish culture there was an additional reason to do so: In that culture contact with a dead body made a person ritually unclean. So, whether you stepped aside as a sign of respect for the dead and the grieving, or as a way to distance yourself from what is unclean, it was the right thing to do, and there's no doubt that the people in the funeral procession, as well as the crowd that accompanied Jesus, expected Him to step aside and respectfully allow the body of the dead man to pass as the sorrowful crowd made its way toward the tomb.

The people expect one thing, but God rarely does what man expects. On this day, the passage tells us that when our Lord saw this grieving widow, *“He had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not” (Luke 7:13)*. Then Jesus reached out and touched the open casket where the body laid, and the men who held it stood still. The solemn funeral procession came to an abrupt halt because of Jesus' strange, unexpected act, and as the people waited in silent anticipation for what would happen next, Jesus said, *“Young man, I say*

*unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak... And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and That God hath visited His people” (Luke 7:14-15).*

The crowd was filled with a holy fear when they realized that Jesus had raised this young man from the dead, and they were reminded of the great prophets of old. These people would recall the stories of Elijah, and his successor Elisha, men who on separate occasions also called a dead son back to life. The memory of those Old Testament events caused the people to declare that another great prophet was in their midst, and they were right, Jesus is a great prophet, the greatest of all the prophets, but as you know, our Lord is infinitely more, and that truth is seen in the very different way that He performed His miracle over death.

Before Elijah raised a widow’s dead son, he laid the boy on a bed and stretched himself out on the body three times. He cried out to God for the boy’s life to return, saying, *“O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again.”* The Bible tells us that *“the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived”* (1 Kings 17:21-22). When Elisha raised a dead son to life, we read that he *“prayed unto the LORD”* (2 Kings 4:33) and laid himself on the dead body, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, and hands to hands. The boy’s body grew warm, he sneezed seven times, and opened his eyes. In these two biblical accounts we see these prophets raised the dead, by praying to the Lord of life.

However, in our Gospel passage this morning, Jesus did not pray. Instead, with a single word our Lord and our God spoke life into what was dead. He spoke one word to this young man, *“Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.”* Jesus Christ spoke as One with power over death itself, One who holds the keys of death (Rev. 1:18), and through His divine power alone, which raised the dead to life, we see the sure evidence that Jesus is God. He spoke as He did at the creation of the world, and where there was darkness, light began to shine. At His Word, heaven and earth were created, and at His Word, life returned to the widow’s son. God speaks, and the procession of the dead becomes a celebration of life. Tragedy turns to triumph. Hope replaces despair.

In this Gospel account we see Christ's power over death itself, and St. Augustine reminds us that this power is not only over physical death, but spiritual death as well. Augustine viewed the miracles in which our Lord raised the dead physically, as works of mercy to the body which have a spiritual reference to the soul. He considered them "illustrations of Christ's Divine power and love in raising the soul," which was once "dead in trespasses and sins." The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), but Augustine declared the comforting truth that: "He who raised Himself from the dead can raise all from the death of sin. Therefore let no one despair."

The thoughts of St. Augustine open the door to a greater understanding of this Scripture. They help us to see that what Christ said to the dead young man, He says to us all, "*Arise.*" This is the message of the Gospel: Arise from the dead, for Christ came that we "*might have life,*" and "*have it more abundantly*" (John 10:10). When our Lord reached out, "*he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.*" Therefore, if God has reached out to you, your response is to stand up for Him. If the Lord has opened your lips, then let your mouth show forth His praise.

The sorrowful crowd is watching. So many are waiting for God to make His presence known in the midst of their heartache, and the way you live the new life to which God has raised you, can be the evidence for which they've been waiting, evidence that God is not some far off detached being, evidence that God, in Jesus Christ, is a Person. He is a Person who refused to step aside as our souls and bodies processed toward the tomb. God did not step aside. Instead, He reached out in the most unexpected way, on the Cross our Savior reached out with the unearned, undeserved, miraculous healing that only God can provide. "*Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto Him be the glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen*" (Ephesians 3:20-21).