

Mother and Child Reunion: Luke 7:11-17 and The Widow of Nain Montecito Covenant Church – August 29, 2004

We don't even know her name. She appears for a fleeting 7 verses in the Gospel of Luke and then she's gone again. Not sure where. Just gone, with her son. The two of them disappear together, no doubt escorted away by every living relative and friend, to celebrate something truly remarkable. Something impossible. You see, moments before the young *boy* had been a *corpse*, on its way to be buried outside the city, but now it was a *boy* again. And the boy's mother—a widow with no other children—could hold his body again in her arms, feels its warmth, and then march it back into town where there was sure to be a party that night, a party loud enough to wake the dead. *Tomorrow* he would have to do his chores, but *tonight* it was time to celebrate.

Well, no one asked me to write the ending to story of the widow of Nain and her son. Least of all Luke. It's just one of those stories that happens some afternoon in the middle of Jesus' Galilean tour, this time about 6 miles from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, and about 20 or so miles from his home base in Capernaum. But it's a story with a happy ending. It's the story of a *mother and child reunion*.

Most stories about death are not happy stories. Not every corpse gets to become a boy again. Not every dead child is miraculously reunited with his parent. Some of us in this room can attest that God has chosen not to prevent every premature death, nor does He see fit to respond to every tragedy by bringing revival, resuscitation and joyful reunion. Several stories in the news lately remind us that *death*—early and unjust death—is part of *life*. Part of what it means to live in a fallen world, a world that yearns for its redemption.

Did you read about little Deontea Riley, the 3-year old boy who choked to death last week on popcorn at a movie theater on Long Island? According to the Associated Press:

“His parents rushed him out of the theater where they performed the Heimlich maneuver without success. ‘I was trying everything,’ his father, Eddie Riley, told the Daily News . . . ‘I was trying to put my finger down his throat. I didn't feel anything.’ Police arrived shortly afterward and tried to clear the boy's mouth and perform CPR, but he was pronounced dead at Mercy Medical Center . . .”

Then there was the bizarre and tragic story of 8-year old Terrance, the autistic boy from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who suffocated to death last summer because Ray Hemphill, one of the elders at Faith Temple Church, lay on the boy's chest “for at least an hour while trying to release ‘demons’ from him.” The elder was sentenced last week to 2 ½ years in prison for “recklessly causing great bodily harm.” Sadly, punishing Ray Hemphill for his recklessness didn't do anything to bring little Terrance back to life.

And many of you heard this week of the cold-blooded murders of Lindsay Cutshall and her fiancé, Jason Allen, whitewater rafting guides working at a Christian adventure camp in the Sierra foothills, near Sacramento. Shot to death in their sleeping bags on the beach. No weapons found. No signs of a struggle. No valuables stolen. No suspects. Here's a line from the parents' press conference a week ago:

“we are going to return to our homes soon and grieve in community with family and church family and carry on to the glory of our heavenly Father who loved us enough to send His beloved Son to die for us.”

Lindsay and Jason are gone. Cut down less than a month before their wedding day. Their parents have gone home to grieve. They don't expect their children will rise again before Christ returns. That's because they know that *normally* the dead stay dead. What we have in Luke chapter 7, and in a handful of other New Testament stories, is the exception to the rule; a dramatic departure from normal; a shocking reversal of something irreversible.

There are actually *seven* life-from-the-dead stories in the New Testament, including the resurrection of Jesus himself. Jesus raises *three* people to life. Both Peter and Paul follow Jesus' example by raising Tabitha and Eutychus. And then there's that cryptic episode at the time of Jesus' crucifixion when “many bodies of the saints” rise and then come out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection.

When I gathered all this together, I was surprised to notice how often the New Testament mentions the *reunion* of the risen one with friends and family. The dead are not raised to be put

on a pedestal, nor are they told to join Jesus' wandering band of disciples. And Jesus certainly doesn't send them off a solitary mystical voyage like a monk on a pilgrimage or like Reepicheep the mouse in C. S. Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

The dead are raised up to life and *immediately reunited* with their loved ones, like a soldier returning home from battle. Jairus' daughter is raised in the presence of her parents, and Lazarus comes forth while his two sisters, Mary and Martha, look on. In the same way, no sooner has the boy from Nain sat up and begun to speak than Jesus gives him back to his mother.

Let's look more closely at the story. Many stories are told in more than one Gospel, but only Luke includes this one in his biography of Jesus. Notice, if you have your Bibles, what comes next there in Luke chapter 7. John the Baptist, languishing in prison, gets wind of what Jesus is up to and begins to wonder. So he sends a delegation of disciples to sort out what is going on. If John the Baptist had been a contestant on *Jeopardy*, his category would have been *Mysterious Men Who Do Shocking Things*, and Alex Trebek would have said something like this:

The man who cured many people of diseases, cast out many demons, gave sight to the blind, healing to the lepers, wholeness to the lame, hearing to the deaf, life to the dead (!), and who preached good news to the poor.

For full points, John *should have* buzzed immediately and responded: *Who is the Expected One?* But instead John hesitates. He *used to* be sure, but lately he hasn't heard enough hell fire in Jesus' preaching, and Jesus failed to hire the right campaign managers, and his stump speeches seem to appeal mostly to blue-collar workers and day laborers. Those like John who pray for Jihad, who want God to wage Holy War, who yearn to wield a sword and rout the Romans—could you blame them for looking around for another candidate?

Somehow John doesn't see that Jesus was answering the question when he raised this widow's son. John wants information, he gets a demonstration. He wants intellectual confirmation of his theology, he gets a tangible demonstration of God's power. This miracle of life from the dead is exactly the sort of proof John needs that Jesus really is the Expected One; that he really is the one sent by God to inaugurate a new age, to announce the dawn of God's royal rule on earth.

When Jesus conquers death, he is like a burglar breaking into Satan's estate. Listen to Luke 11, verses 21-22:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder.

Jesus is the Stronger One in this parable. He is the One who slips past Satan's security system, overpowers the man himself, steals his stuff and claims Satan's territory for God!

How does he do it? Let's look again at our story. At first glance, Jesus' approach to the little town of Nain seems unremarkable. From hamlet to village, day after day, Jesus waged his Messianic campaign along dusty roads and away from the big cities. With disciples and groupies in tow, Jesus walked everywhere, with only the roughest sandals to protect his calloused feet. Deep ruts carved in the roads by seasonal rains and countless carts made it hard to look around as you walked. So he picked his way and told his stories and maybe didn't even look up until he heard the wailing cries from the funeral procession making its way out of the town, through its gates, toward the cemetery just beyond.

Jewish burials were always outside the city. Sometimes in caves, sometimes in catacombs, often in clusters of family monuments, the dead were buried nearby the village but always just beyond its walls. Close enough to remind, but not close enough to contaminate. Close enough to honor the dead but far enough away to allow the living to get on with the task of survival. I've clamored over these ancient necropolises in Italy, Jordan and Turkey; they were everywhere in the Roman world.

Perhaps you've heard of the catacombs in Rome, which were not (contrary to popular mythology) places for fleeing Christians to hide. They were actually underground cemeteries, dug deep into soft rock, and expanded over the years, deeper and deeper, to hold hundreds and hundreds of bodies. Death in the ancient world was an ever-present, unavoidable part of life.

Unavoidably, then, Jesus and his companions collide with the procession of mourners. Respectfully his weary entourage stands aside to allow the funeral to proceed. If this was a typical procession, it was taking place on the same day as the boy's death. In the heat of the

Middle East, you dare not wait an extra day before putting the dead to rest. First in the procession would be the boy's mother and any other female relatives and friends. Then you would see the funeral bier itself, a plank on which lay the boy's body, in regular clothes or perhaps wrapped in a shroud. Next, would come male relatives and friends, then the hired musicians and professional mourners, and finally the rest of the community.

But Jesus doesn't simply stand by quietly to let this sad procession pass. He steps forward, into the parade, to intercept the boy's mother. He has this crazy idea that his coming—to this earth, to this village—will somehow reverse the curse; that he has the power to turn back the forces of evil, even the forces of death. Evidently, he thinks his presence, wherever he appears, means it is time to celebrate, not to mourn. So he does something very odd. He approaches the boy's mother and begins to speak. "Do not weep," he says. He may have had to repeat himself, to be heard over the cries of the mourners. "Do not weep."

Doesn't Jesus know that tears are an essential part of the grief process? Are we to conclude that followers of Jesus shouldn't cry at funerals? Is Jesus saying true disciples will be happy all the time? Or that true Christians don't feel the searing pain of loss? If that's the message here, then I shouldn't be up here preaching, for last December I watched my mother die, and I wept. I grieved then, and I still do. This past Tuesday at Westmont's faculty retreat, I sat down at breakfast and found myself in a 5-way conversation about ailing parents and watching them die. I wept my way through that conversation, saying as little as possible, but then, four hours later, when I sat down with an entirely different group of people for lunch, guess what they all decided to talk about? And so we weep.

Notice what it says in v. 13: "Jesus had *compassion* for her." Not disdain or condescension. Not impatience or frustration. Jesus felt *compassion*. He felt her pain. He shared her suffering. Think, for a minute, about the plight of this boy's mother. Luke is very clear about three things: she was a *woman*, she was a *widow*, and she had *no other children*. Put those three together and you've got someone who is totally vulnerable to the predators and vultures out there, those who plotted to devour any wealth she might have and to reduce her to economic slavery. She was without legal recourse or visible means of support; she was alone and vulnerable in a man's world, she had lost her access through proper channels to the larger community, along with any vestiges of social status within the village.

Is it any wonder the Bible—Old and New Testaments—gives special place to widows? The Law of Moses has special laws to protect them (Deut. 24:17-21; 26:12-13). The Psalms call God "a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (68:5; cf. 146:9), and Isaiah and Jeremiah warn Israel of the dangers of neglecting the widows among them (Isa. 1:17; Jer 22:3). In Jesus' day, widows were perhaps the most vulnerable members of Roman society.

Think of Jesus' parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18. The *only* hope this imaginary widow has to find justice is to badger the judge relentlessly until it drives him nuts. She has no advocate, no defender, no court-appointed lawyer. All she has is perseverance and tenacity. . . and maybe a shrill, whiny voice. Only her constant nagging will persuade him to rule in her favor. That's why, back in Luke 8, our boy's death was not just any death. Jesus felt compassion *for her*, you remember, not for the boy, because he recognized that *his* passage from life to death was also *his mother's* passage from protection to vulnerability.

Who, for us today, are the most vulnerable members of society? If the God of Israel was so concerned to protect widows and orphans, how would he want us to behave toward the unborn? Or the illegal aliens? Or the under-classes just down the hill from here, working 2 and 3 jobs, living 2 or 3 families in a house? Or the vulnerable and defenseless civilians, mothers and children, in war-torn countries around the world?

I want you to notice two other things from verse 14. First, Jesus touches the bier. Second, Jesus speaks to the corpse. As for touching the bier, folks looking on would conclude that Jesus had incurred ritual defilement for 7 days (cf. Num 19:11, 16). Sometimes you couldn't avoid becoming impure, since it came from things like childbirth and skin sores and touching corpses and graves. It was not a sin to be ritually impure, but cleansing rituals were mandatory and took varying amounts of time before the one defiled would become pure again. All over Israel archaeologists have unearthed ritual baths, about the size of hot tubs, carved into the bedrock, sometimes in people's basements, which people would use not for bathing but for ritual purification.

So purity and impurity was a big deal for the Jews of Jesus day. But here is a remarkable thing. Jesus evidently believes he can reverse the flow of contamination. Rather than Jesus becoming impure, the boy becomes pure. Rather than death contaminating Jesus, Jesus will “contaminate” the dead. It is almost as if Jesus is immune and his purity is contagious. When Jesus shows up, life and vitality spread outward from him to anyone who gets in the way. Maybe this is how we should think of the Christian life; the closer we get to Jesus, the more his holiness and purity will rub off.

The second bit in verse 14 was that Jesus *spoke directly to the dead*. Why would Jesus *speak* to a *corpse*? It doesn't help to suggest that the boy may not have been dead after all; the ancients didn't need Intensive Care Units and Death Certificates to know when someone had died. Anyone surrounded by the dead soon becomes an expert in recognizing the signs of death. I received an education myself last December when I watched my mother move through the final stages of death. Next to me at her bedside was my sister who has worked for years as a nurse. For her there were no surprises. And no doubts about what was happening. I kept on hoping right up until the end, but when she died we all could tell. It was perhaps the saddest, most holy, most horrible moment of my life.

For sure, the boy was dead. Which means when Jesus spoke he was simply refusing to follow our rules, our logic. This is actually Jesus' pattern, isn't it? He seems to like defying human expectations. In the next chapter, he speaks to Jairus' dead daughter (Luke 8:54) and John's Gospel describes him speaking to the dead Lazarus as well (Jn 11:43). Jesus spoke to the *dead*, just like he spoke to the *storm* and like he spoke to *demons* and like he spoke to *Satan*. His voice announces his authority, on earth and even under the earth.

One more thing about the way Jesus works. Back in the days of the prophets, you might remember, Elijah and Elisha had similar experiences. Both prophets raised a child back to life though the differences are very instructive. For some reason, Elijah has to lay on top of the widow's son in Zarephath, three times, and he has to cry out to God in prayer before the life returns. Jesus doesn't pray (or he doesn't seem to). He doesn't have to repeat himself. He doesn't make physical contact. He doesn't even break a sweat. He simply speaks and the corpse comes to life.

Elishah follows the example of Elijah, and it takes him two tries before the son of the Shunemite becomes warm, then sneezes, then opens his eyes.

If you know these stories—and we should assume that many in the crowd that day did—then you can't help but notice Jesus doesn't have to work nearly as hard. Prophets like Elijah and Elishah pray, they plead, they repeat themselves, and they symbolically use their own bodies to transfer life into the dead child. Jesus simply speaks. Almost like God at creation. “Let there be life.” And there was life.

No wonder that in verse 16, the people's response was *fear*. When God shows up, fear is natural and perfectly appropriate. The crowds feared when Jesus healed the paralytic (Lk 5:26); Jesus' disciples feared when he calmed the storm (8:25) and an entire region became fearful when Jesus liberated a demoniac (8:37; cf. Lk 1:12, 65; 2:9). Jesus isn't safe, you know. He makes corpses sit up and pay attention. This is *scary*, but not scary like some B-grade Zombie movie, “*The Night of the Living Dead*,” where Death invades the land of the living. In this story, *Life* invades the land of the *dead*. This is way scarier than a Halloween slasher film or a Hitchcock suspense thriller.

These days, we're afraid of terrorists and burglars, and we're afraid of global warming, but I'm not sure we understand the fear of God very well. Many of us pray to our “Buddy Jesus” as though having a *personal* savior is rather like ordering a *personal-pan* pizza. (By the way, now you can buy *Buddy Christ*, as it is called, as a dashboard ornament for your car.) When Jesus is our buddy and God-talk is casual; when churches focus more on *my comfort* than on *God's glory*; when heaven is where everyone goes and hell is an embarrassment, is it any wonder that we have trouble with fear and trembling? Many congregations would be shocked, even dismayed, if God actually showed up in power on Sunday morning! I've heard of *What Would Jesus Do?* Now there's even *What Would Jesus Eat?* and *Where Would Jesus Shop?* But I've never heard of *Who Would Jesus Scare?*

When was the last time you felt *fear* in the presence of God? I don't mean a quiver up your spine or a deep sense of amazement at the power of the surf on Butterfly Beach or the

vastness of the night sky high in the Sierra Nevadas. I don't even mean the awe you feel when you stand shoulder to shoulder with a thousand worshiping believers, as each one raises a voice in praise to God. I mean the unsettling, unnerving sense that God is so holy and so powerful, that God is such a "consuming fire" (Heb 12:29) that our very existence is an open question.

The other response of the people is *praise*. The people glorified God. This is what people do, instinctively, when God intervenes. In Luke's Gospel alone we see this happen again and again, at least 10 times (cf. 5:9, 26; 9:43; 13:13; 17:18; 18:43; 23:47). Here, God is praised for two reasons. First, because "a great prophet has arisen among us."

The crowds had decided Jesus was a *prophet*. I'd be willing to bet that this is the category for Jesus that most people would pick on the surveys. This is the title most of Jesus followers would think of first. Jesus himself takes a survey on this question, way up north at Caesarea Philippi. "Who do the crowds say that I am?" he asks (Luke 9:18). Luke gives us the buzz: some say "John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets." All of these answers are really the same: Jesus was a *prophet*.

Jews of Jesus' day would not assume that Jesus' miracles proved he was God. What they proved was that he was on God's *side*; they proved God was *well-pleased* with him. Jesus' miracles put him in the same league as Moses and Elijah—he was clearly a great prophet.

Jesus was a lot like Elijah, wasn't he? He had just raised a dead boy for his widowed mother. And like Elijah, Jesus liked to offer aid to the socially marginal, the losers, the vulnerable. And yet Jesus was also *not like* Elijah, remember? He merely *spoke* to the corpse. He doesn't plead with God or labor to accomplish the miracle. Jesus *is* a *prophet* but he is also *much more than* a prophet. He is "Lord," precisely what Luke calls him back in verse 13.

The people also conclude, secondly, that "*God has looked favorably upon his people*" Or that's how it reads in the *New Revised Standard Version*. This little phrase is so important to the story—it's like the punch line—but it is rather difficult to translate into English, as you can see from a sampling of modern versions of Luke 7:16.

NRSV	"God has looked favorably on his people!"
RSV / KJV / NASV	"God has visited his people!"
CEV	"God has come to his people."
NIV / TNIV	"God has come to help his people."
<i>The Message</i>	"God is back, looking to the needs of his people!"
New English	"God has shown his care for his people."
New Living	"We have seen the hand of God at work today."
Good News	"God has come to save his people!"

The language behind all this variety comes right out of the Old Testament in story after story in which God intervenes or interrupts to deliver his people. He's not just looking down on them, or paying them a visit. God is using power to bring them rescue. God is saving them from peril. Like when God *appears* to Moses to liberate the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 4:31).

So when Jesus raises the widow's son, the people know what they're witnessing. They can see God's rescuing hand at work. The end of the age was at hand. God's promise to defeat death was coming true. Once again, this doesn't mean they thought Jesus was *God*, or that they believed in the incarnation or the Trinity. What they were celebrating was simply the way Jesus showed so clearly that God had begun to act *among them* in a new and powerful way. All those on the outside—the frail, the poor and the lowly, those barred from the corridors of power, those victimized by the whims of the elite—these people were now enjoying a visit from God.

Today as we look back, we can't help but see even more in these words than they did. In Jesus God *really has* visited his people in a way they couldn't understand. Jesus is *God with us*. God among us. God visiting us. So when we watch Jesus arrive at the gates of a little village in southern Galilee, moved by compassion for an anonymous, bereaved widow, it turns out we're watching God!

Not many months later, Jesus would ascend to Jerusalem for the last time, where he would weep over a city that failed to recognize her day of visitation (Lk 19:44). Tragically, Israel's leaders had failed to welcome the Expected One. But for now, on at least one afternoon, outside at least one village, all eyes were opened and the people could see God at work.

Perhaps, for those of us looking forward to reunions—with mothers. . . and fathers, with grandparents and children, husbands, wives and friends—perhaps we should *live* with this story

for a while, ponder its mysteries, let it bolster our faith, let it remind us to fear, and show us how to glorify a God whose Son has conquered death. If he did it then, he can do it again. Christ alone is our hope for a happy ending.