

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 20, 2004**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Luke 7:11-17

¹¹ 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 coffin, and those carrying it 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. (NIV)

Colliding Parades

Death on Parade

"Everybody loves a parade." But not this kind. *Parade* is not the term we usually use; *procession* is more like it.

It had all started earlier in the day, when the death had taken place. We don't know how it happened, only that it had. It was a young man who had died, a resident of the village of Nain, a small town in the hills of Galilee. We don't know many details of the young man's life or of his mother's, only enough to give us a sense of how deep the sorrow was.

- First, we know the one who died was young. An older child? A teenager? Regardless, we understand. There's a particular sadness when a young person dies. Have you ever received news like this mother in Nain received? I have. The shock of it all makes it seem unreal. But it is. The untimely nature of the death of young people shakes us. We can't comprehend why such a thing would happen. And we mourn—not only the loss of the person, but the loss of possibilities. For a bright and talented young man, the potential was boundless. What would he be? What would he do? Then he's gone, and the questions seem cruelly irrelevant.

- We know in addition that this young man was an only child. There were no other sons and daughters to comfort the mother. There was no other child to receive her love. She had only one, and now he had been taken from her.
- We know also that the young man's mother was a widow. In other words, she had no husband to support her. I bet she was counting on her only son to support her in her old age. Now who would do it? As if the pain of his death weren't enough, added to it were worries about her future? How would she live without him?

It's probably safe for us to guess that things would have happened that day in ways typical of the Jewish culture. On learning of the death, the mother cries out. She tears her upper garment. She stumbles over to the fire pit and reaches down for a handful of ashes, long a symbol of death, decay and grief. She sprinkles some of the ashes on her head; on this day, death has dominion over her. Neighbors come to offer their help as the body is prepared for burial. It is laid on the ground. Hair and nails are trimmed. It is washed, anointed with spices. It is wrapped in the best garment the widow can find and laid out to await burial. As preparations are made and neighbors busy themselves to help the widow, the blast of the ram's horn sounds outside, conveying the news that a life in the village has ended.

Then the widow sits on the floor in her grief. As if the horror of the death is not painful enough in itself, several things compound it:

- One is the Jewish belief in the afterlife. These beliefs were sketchy—somewhat understandable since the Hebrew Scriptures give few details about the resurrection of the body. But there was no certainty when it came to life beyond the grave. Even the most pious rabbi would leave the world with his future in doubt. So what about this young man? Where was he?
- Adding to the grief as well is the Jewish stigma of childlessness. Is God punishing this poor widow by taking her only son? If so, of what sin does she need to make confession?
- And strangely, the words spoken by her neighbors may be doing more harm than good. It was typical at this time to encourage the bereaved to submit to God's will, to immediately accept what has happened as being part of God's plan. But when someone is in the haze of grief, such words may not feel comforting, but only sting like salt in an open wound.

Evening comes, and it's time for the burial. The funeral orator who has been hired goes first in the parade to the burial ground outside the village. Following him are the women, including some hired to mourn and wail out of respect for the dead. There may be a flute player or two in the procession as well, hired to play appropriately mournful music as the company makes its way. Then comes the young man's body. It is laid out on, probably not in a covered casket, but on an uncovered bier. His hands are folded over his chest. His face remains uncovered. After him comes a crowd of considerable

size, consisting of many people of the town. And among them is the mother, the one who would soon hear a new voice of comfort.

As I was reading about Jewish burial customs last week, one detail struck me, and it's been stuck in my mind ever since. It was the food that was eaten after the burial. After the parade to the graveyard had been completed and people had returned to the village, a simple meal would be served. The menu? Bread, hard-boiled eggs and lentils. Picture those things: bread, eggs and lentils. Do you see what they have in common? They are round in shape. The significance, says Biblical scholar Alfred Edersheim, was to remind people of the way things go on this earth: we all roll forward unstopably to death—a parade to the graveyard.

That reminds me of an observation made by Augustine, a leader of the Christian church early in its history. Augustine thought of what doctors say when they've diagnosed a terminal illness: "I'm sorry. There's nothing more we can do." Really, he observed, a doctor could say that about each of us immediately after we're born, healthy and happy. "I'm sorry, but your child is a sinful human being. That condition, I'm afraid, is terminal. He's not going to make it."

You see, don't you, that what Martin Luther observed about this part of Scripture is true? He noted that when we look at the parade to the graveyard of Nain, we are looking at more than just something that happened on a day long ago. We are looking at a summary of the history of virtually every human being. Each one of us is marching slowly, inexorably toward death.

Life on Parade

Another parade was taking place that day, and it couldn't have been more different than the one coming out of Nain.

This parade began in Capernaum, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples probably rose early, had a simple breakfast—bread and fish?—and set out for the Galilean hills. A large crowd followed. I imagine the spirit of this parade was exuberant. Some estimate that it was springtime. If so, we can picture the new life springing up, the new greenery, flowers in bloom. I wonder if some in the group thought of the words from Scripture, from the Song of Solomon: *Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come...* (Song of Songs 2:10,11 RSV)

And of course there were more reasons for joy than just the blossoms and blooms. There was the Master. Every day brought some new surprise. He was saying things that moved their hearts and animated their minds. He taught of the kingdom. He turned the staid sayings of the Pharisees on their heads as he spoke of the kingdom of God and love that captured a man and would not let him go.

And the miracles. Why, just the day before they had witnessed another one. A Roman centurion had sent word to Jesus that his servant was deathly ill. This gentile was a good man; he had built the town synagogue. Yet he strangely told the Master that he deserved nothing good. Rather, he said, just say the word and my servant will be healed. The master, amazed at his faith, did say the word. And his servant was healed instantly! Praise God!

The possibilities seemed boundless. What would happen today? What would Jesus say? What would he do? I imagine a spring in the step of each of those who were following Jesus—a spring even as evening came and they had covered nearly 25 miles as they neared the village of Nain.

Which keeps rolling?

Two parades collide on the road outside of Nain. Can you imagine yourself standing on a hill overlooking the road that day? It's like game of chicken, two crowds coming at each other. But this game of chicken is no game. What happens here has cosmic implications.

The crowd comprising the funeral parade begins to slow. The mother wonders why. Or maybe she doesn't at first. Probably to change pallbearers. Helping to carry the body was noble work, and many wanted to take a turn.

But then she sees him, a man she does not recognize. Not someone from the village. He's found his way through the crowd, found his way to her. She notices that a crowd that is following him. Another group of travelers coming the opposite way. She realizes that one group must make way for the other.

But which will it be? I'm sure the mother expected that hers would go on. Customarily, if people would have encountered a funeral procession, they would have joined it. It was considered a good work—one of the best in sight of God—to comfort someone bereaved. And human decency demanded it. After all, we yield to funeral processions, too.

And even if the funeral parade were to stop temporarily—to let the other group pass, for instance—it would surely keep rolling on. Why would it stop? The only reason this procession to the burial ground would stop would be if there were no longer any body to bury.

This mother soon realizes, though, that this man who leads the other group has no intention of yielding. He comes to her. He looks at her. He surveys the scene. His guts are jolted by the wrongness of it all. This is not what is supposed to happen. This is not how things were created to be. Death, this alien thing that came into the world, is not meant to have this kind of dominion. Deeply moved, he speaks to the mother. "Don't cry anymore."

Then he shocks the crowd. He reaches out to touch the body! Nobody would do that unless absolutely necessary. The touching of a corpse makes one unclean according to the ceremonial Law. But he reaches out anyway. The touch of his hand brings the whole procession to a complete standstill.

Then he speaks. Not to the mother this time, but, inexplicably, to the dead man. "Young man, I say to you, get up!"

Color begins to return to lifeless cheeks. Then the chest heaves with a breath. Eyes open. He sits up. He speaks. He lives!

Then Jesus does something reminiscent of the prophet Elijah of old, who also raised a widow's son. Jesus gives this resurrected son back to his mother.

Death's parade has halted. And life keeps rolling on.

I mentioned that Martin Luther saw this incident as emblematic of the way things go in the world; death keeps rolling on, seemingly unstoppable, right? But there's more to it than that. This incident also reveals something else: Jesus meets death head on, and he undoes it. Jesus halts the grim parade.

Sometimes we don't notice, but in reality it's happening right now. Jesus is alive and active among us, as active as he was on that road outside Nain. Think about this: What is cause of death? God says it's sin. Death is consequence of humanity rebelling against God. The whole human race is now destined for death—both the death of body and the death of soul in hell. If only sin could be done away with! If only the animosity between people and God could be removed. If only someone could take sin and all its death into himself and suffer it once and for all. If only someone could die for the sin of the world, then death could be undone. If only someone could face death head on and defeat it. If only someone could force death to yield.

All this has happened. Who has done it? The one who stopped the death parade that day outside of Nain.

That's Jesus' business—to bring life out of death. He speaks to us as he spoke to the widow of Nain and brings us to life: "Your sins are forgiven. Whoever believes in me will live." He touches our lifeless bodies with his own body and blood and brings life out of death. And, of course, we anticipate great things in the future. "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." And we know that this one who raised a young man of Nain will raise our lifeless bodies to live, glorified, forever. Real resurrection. Death will lose all its dominion, and life will reign.

How can all this not radically alter our perceptions of death? And of life?

One more thing I want to take note of here... The people who witnessed all this outside Nain—they sensed something big was happening. "A great prophet has appeared among us... God has come to help his people," they say. Know who else had said similar words? Zechariah had when his son, John the Baptist, was born. He realized that God's plan for the world was entering its climactic phase. Likewise, these people at Nain were sensing that in Jesus, everything was about to change, even things that seemed unstoppable and irreversible, like death.

They were right. God sees the death in his world. And in Jesus Christ, he has stepped in to stop it. Death will not roll on forever. Life will. Amen.