

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 16 – Sept 24, 2023
Luke 7:11-17 – Easter at Nain
Pastor Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

At the gates of the city of Nain, two crowds collide. Jesus and his disciples and a joyous crowd with him enter, just as a dead man and his mother and a funeral procession come out. Life meets death. The living only-begotten Son of God meets the dead only-begotten son of a widow. And he who is life is triumphant. Death is undone at his word. “Young man, I say to you, arise.” So the dead man sat up and began to speak, as his Lord commanded.

The funeral procession that day mourned as those who have no hope, but the hope of the nations came and touched the coffin. They wept, but their weeping was turned to joy. So the crowd of mourners was swallowed up by the crowd of life, just as our Lord swallowed up death on Easter.

Yes, they saw before their very eyes a glimpse of what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4, “Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

And so they believed. They said, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!”

But for us, we still await our hope of resurrection. In the midst of life we are in death. Each time we catch the flu, or hear a diagnosis, or take a loved one to the hospital, we are reminded of that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Death is written in graying hair, fading strength, and wrinkled skin. These reminders teach that we depend on God for every breath we take. Everything we have is a gift from God. Not just our possessions, but even our life, and the lives of those we love.

Remember the story of Job. God gave him great wealth, and he had the blessing of seven sons and three daughters. Yet one day, a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” And while he was still speaking, another came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” And while he was still speaking, another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” And while he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.”

All in an instant, everything Job had and all his children were taken away. And yet when he heard these terrible words he did not despair. He fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Like Job, everything we have is God’s gift. Especially our lives and the lives of our children. We must never say that we’ve worked hard to get where we are, because none of it depends on us. And the Lord may take away at any time. We pray that he would never test us like he tested Job and that widow of Nain. I could not bear the sudden tragic death of my children. But even if that were to happen – God forbid – we must not despair. For all things are in God’s hands. And we know he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. His compassion is on those who fear him. So he was moved with compassion when he saw the grieving widow of Nain.

For our Lord does not take away on a whim. It gives him no pleasure to bring grief or snatch away life. All that our Lord does is out of love, for that is his nature. When the Lord gives, he gives out of love. Even when he takes away, though we do not understand it, he takes away out of love. He loves us so much that he takes away, to strengthen our faith, to draw words of faith from our lips, to create deeper trust in our hearts. He seeks a trust that clings to him and to his love even though we cannot understand what he has done.

And we do understand that our God has loved us in this way: That he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Because of that kind of love, our Lord has compassion on those who fear him. He knows our sorrows. That kind of love made him say to the widow of Nain,

“Do not weep.” It made him touch the coffin and say, “Young man, I say to you, arise.”

For he who is the Word made flesh, who gave up his own flesh for the life of the world, he always restores life in every place, even wherever he has taken it away. Always.

He quickly restored life to the sons of the widow of Nain and Zarephath. But for us, we must be patient. We must await the last day to see our loved ones arise. And yet we wait with confidence, for his promise of resurrection is sure. We wait like Job, whose faith was tested in deep anguish, yet he never cursed God. So Job was raised from the ashes. And God restored his fortunes twice as much as before. Twice the number of camels and flocks and herds.

But remember that God did not give Job twice as many children as before. No, at the end of his testing he only received seven more sons and three more daughters, the same as before. For the first seven and three were still his. They slept in the grave, but they would surely rise. Their lives were only hidden with Christ in God. And Job knew it, for he believed in the resurrection of the dead. “I know that my Redeemer lives,” he confidently confessed, “And at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

Dear saints, he who raised the sons of the widow of Zarephath and Nain, he will also raise you and Job and all the dead on the Last Day. For he is the only begotten Son of the Father. And God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, that we might have life in him. Jesus laid down his life for the life of the world. His mother Mary wept when his life was taken away, and when she laid him in the tomb. But he laid down his life of his own accord, and he has authority to take it up again. And take it up he did, for on the third day he burst from the tomb.

Now your life is found in him. You have died with him in baptism, and now your life is hidden with Christ in God. So do not grieve as those who have no hope. Enter the gates of life, by means of Jesus, the living door.

Death is real. But the resurrection of the dead is more real. Life has the final word. The saints who are buried in the cemetery back there will rise, “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” Then shall death be swallowed up in victory, for death has lost its sting. For Jesus Christ, our prophet, king, and God, has arisen among us.

And now Jesus leads a new triumphant procession. Not a funeral procession, but a wedding procession. The bridegroom of the church leads us out with joy. He wipes every tear from our eyes. He brings us to the wedding feast of the Lamb. And until we arrive, here in the church he is making his Bride ready, clothing her with robes of fine linen, washing her bright and pure in his blood. And here he already calls us to eat and drink, to rejoice in his presence at the altar of his Supper. For the living God gives us his flesh to eat as the bread of life. In communion we join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, myriads of saints and martyrs, to eat and drink at the marriage feast of the Lamb in his kingdom which has no end.

May that joyous crowd of saints always increase, until it swallows up all tears and all death and all mourning forever in the day of our Lord. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.