

“STRONGER THAN DEATH” LUKE: 7:11-13 PENTECOST 2

If you were to ask most people at what point death intrudes on one’s life they would point to the last days of a person’s life or at the very least they would cite the time when an illness was diagnosed that threatened the continuation of life. As Christians, we have a very different perspective. For us, the end of life is only the very last event that death casts on our path. We know that death has been at work on us from the very beginning of our life on earth.

When a mother gives birth she suffers a loss as the child leaves her womb and the child is sent on a path that inevitably spins toward death. And as we pass through life, have you ever noticed that all of our life passages are accompanied by mini-deaths. The woman in today’s Gospel, for instance, having already lost her husband, and now having lost her son, will now be considered to have no value by everyone else in her world because she has also experienced the death of the only things that give her worth in her culture—her roles as wife and mother...and that rejection will cause another kind of death for her as well.

Likewise when a child begins school, graduates from high school, leaves home for college or to enter the armed services, or gets married, each passage brings into life a kind of death that changes the relationship with their parents as it has existed. Each passage adds another nail to our coffins. The burden of death we carry through life is a heavy one indeed.

So as today’s Gospel unfolds we encounter that sad funeral procession and it’s not difficult to picture in our minds...moving slowly out of town toward some desolate graveyard, the mourners somber and silent, not knowing what to say to the distraught mother. Who of us have not found ourselves in such a situation at one time or another...the death of a loved one, the death of a job, the death of a relationship, the death of a marriage, death of a deeply held hope.

Oh yes, we *have* been there, burdened with feelings of guilt and anger on one level, feelings of doubt, fear and hopelessness on another. At such times when our world seems to grind to a stop, and we are feeling isolated and lost, God, if there even is one, seems to be far away and unconcerned, and we struggle to keep on believing and hold on to any hope.

The words we use with one another at such times betray our discomfort with what we are experiencing and our despair at having the wherewithal to keep on going. So we tell one another that death is, after all, like life, just a naturally occurring situation...everyone will experience it...or we can rationalize our loss with the thought that death at least brought an end to the suffering being experienced...or our loved one is at least in a better place...an eternal place...we say *anything* we can to avoid the painful truth that death is God’s final word to a fallen and sinful humanity, and we therefore all of us deserve some day to die.

When Jesus encountered that funeral procession in Nain that day, he met far more than just a natural occurrence. He came face to face with a power so strong, so fearful, that we will do anything in our power to deny its existence or evade it. So we dress up our dead to imitate how they looked in life...we leave tokens in their caskets of activities they enjoyed in life...we cling to images of life as we remember it—never realizing that Satan is using these very efforts to cling to life to get us to choose death.

So when Jesus met that funeral procession, he knew that death was the word that God had spoken over our rebellious ways of living, a condemning word we are helpless to answer. We have *no* answer, but Jesus does! In an ironic twist God meets God at the gate of that town called Nain when God’s verdict of death for sinful human beings meets the Son of God who came to reverse the verdict. The result is that Jesus stops death in its tracks and God’s verdict of bad news for human beings is reversed by the saving word God himself sent to change it.

As Jesus touched the stretcher carrying the dead man and spoke those life-giving words to the corpse that lay on it, He sent a message, a sign, good news that God's love was going to win out over his wrath. Luke tells us that in that moment when the Lord looked with compassion on the helpless mother, he told her to dry her tears, touched the bier and commanded the young man to arise. The dead man immediately sat up, began to speak and Jesus gave him back to his disbelieving mother.

It is not insignificant that this is the first time in his Gospel that Luke refers to Jesus as "Lord." That is because this miracle is indeed a sign—asserting that Jesus is more than just a great teacher *about* God. He is himself God, the one who meets death head on, who turns the tables on death and in doing a deed that is larger than death, gives the people of Nain and us a sign not just of who he is but what he will in a short time be accomplishing before God that we so desperately need—a way out of death to life.

Then he, the eternal Lord, will, in the place of this mother, her son, the mourners and all who die (in short, everyone, for all time, everywhere)...that eternal Lord will suffer and himself die on a cross and God will raise him from that death, thereby crushing the power of death in all of its forms forever. There is hope for this dying world only when the One who is larger than death creates a new beginning for a dying world by looking "favorably on his people."

No wonder, then, that that crowd outside the city of Nain, including every sinner, every outcast under the sentence of death—people like you and me, people who had seen the power of God to destroy this last great enemy of humankind waiting to snatch each of us up...it is no wonder that this crowd would so spontaneously respond to what they had seen with fear, glorifying God! Having nowhere else to go with their own efforts, and now having met the One who is larger than death, the One in whom they have met God himself, they marvel at Jesus' power. Such recognition of who Jesus is, and such a response of glorifying God who they meet in him, the Scriptures describe as faith.

Those who have faith are those who are already alive in their believing...glorifying and praising God who, in Jesus, has dismantled death and the sin that caused it, opening up again for us a path to our eternal Father. In baptism God has made us part of that crowd. At the Communion table, he has welcomed us to the family meal where we will be strengthened for the journey...nourished for all of the attacks of death still to come our way. Through the Spirit of Jesus living in us, we ourselves, are now larger than death, because we have been given a life as big and unending as his.

Still, the truth is that despite what Jesus has done to overcome death, we continue to experience big and little deaths as we make our journeys through life. Death still continues to dog us. How do God's people live so surrounded by such death?

Well, we could go around protesting about how unfair life is. We could simply try to squeeze out of life as much as we can before death finally overtakes us. We might just give up and wait for it to overtake us. But the Holy Spirit provides us an alternative!

We can walk with this community of believers among whom God has placed us, heads held high with others who follow the One who is larger than death, who is the Word of eternal life. Living in our baptisms, we claim the new life Jesus won for us on the cross, and with our Lord, we count it a joy and privilege to reach out and touch the marginalized and outcasts of the world, those still held captive by death, and be the bearers to them of the life Jesus brings. Whenever we meet death or any dying experience of life, our own or that of others, we are given the vision to behold the One who stops the procession to the grave and says to us, "Don't weep...I say to you rise!" And rise we do, to leave behind death forever!

