

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson for this morning presents us with a rather unusual story about the compassion of Jesus. Luke tells us, that as Jesus and his disciples were entering the village of Nain, just a short distance from Nazareth, they encounter a funeral procession. Somehow, Jesus realizes that the dead man on the bier was his mother’s only son, and that she was a widow.

Even today, we can realize the extent of this woman’s grief. Not only had she buried her husband, now she was burying her only son. I can’t think of a more painful grief, than for a parent to bury a child. But in that day, this woman was also burying her future security. In that culture, women had little rights, and it was a son’s responsibility to care for and support his mother, when his father was no longer able. Widows without sons to care for them were often forced to beg for alms, just to survive.

What happens next, according to Luke, is an incredible scene. First, we are told that when Jesus realized this widow’s plight, he had compassion for her. Of course, that should not surprise us. Throughout his ministry, Jesus expressed compassion for those in need. But I believe each of us would have been surprised at how Jesus expressed his compassion, had we been a part of that crowd.

First, Jesus turns to the widow, whose only son had just died, and says, “Do not weep.” Personally, I don’t think this is an inappropriate comment to make to someone who has just lost a loved one, even if it is said to a man or woman who is burying an elderly parent. But to hear someone say “Do not weep” to a parent who is in the midst of burying a child would certainly seem out of place, if not callous.

Then Luke tells us, Jesus went up and touched the bier on which the young man’s body was being carried, and the bearers of the bier stood still. They stopped the funeral procession, no doubt looking at Jesus in wonder. Because of custom, anyone other than the bearers of a funeral bier who touched it, was considered to be made unclean, defiled. And so they stopped, wondering what might have caused Jesus to do such a thing.

And as they looked at Jesus in bewilderment, Jesus spoke – not to those carrying the body, not to the crowd, not to the mother, but to the dead man, as if he expected him to hear. He said, “Young man, I say to you rise!” Don’t you think that if we were in that crowd, that would have also gotten our attention.

Even more astonishing, the dead widow’s son heard Jesus. He actually sat up and began to speak. It’s a miracle that the bearers of the bier didn’t drop the young man to the street. Then Jesus took the young man, perhaps unwrapped him from his burial clothes, and gave him back to his mother. And Luke tells us that fear seized all of them, as it certainly would have seized me had I witnessed that event. And the people praised God for the presence of Christ among them.

I must admit, that when I first read this miraculous story of the compassion of Jesus for the widow of Nain, I experienced a lot of questions as to how I might approach this text. Being a pastor does not shield one from grief, and God knows we have had our share of grief in our congregation. We have had our share of untimely death and parents burying their children, and that grief is not easy to dispel.

As a result, this story has called to my memory several times over my tenure as your pastor, when it would have been nice to have Jesus interrupt our funeral processions and display the same compassion as he did that day at Nain. But that

didn't happen. And so we have been left to grieve the loss of our loved ones, to say goodbye to our parents, spouses and children, as we seek to console each other as members of this extended family the baptized. What happened that day in Nain is certainly not the typical thing that we expect to experience during the burial of a loved one. The dead don't hear our voice, get up and speak.

So what are we to make of this strange story. First, I believe that it truly does reveal to us the grace of God. Jesus had compassion upon this widow, in the midst of her grief, which was compounded by the fact that with the death of her son, she had no means of support. Jesus seized the opportunity to bring God's grace to bear, not only in awakening the dead son, but also upon the life of his mother.

But let us be clear about this fact. There were only a few persons in all of the Gospel stories, where Jesus is reported to have restored to physical life, someone who had died. Jesus did not walk from town to town, calling on the recently departed to sit up and speak. And Jesus certainly did not heal everyone who was suffering from disease and illness. But in and through these miracle stories that are recorded in Scripture, we are given an opportunity to witness the compassion and grace of God, which was Christ's mission reveal.

No, as we live our lives in this world, each of us will bear our share of sorrows and tribulations, of anguish and toil, and yes, our share of grief, as we bury those whom we have come to know and love. But we do not grieve alone. In addition to our biological family and friends, we have, through our baptism, been claimed by God as his sons and daughters, and brought into an extended family as God's redeemed children. As a result, it is only natural that we share in the grief of one another, and uplift one another in their distress.

I believe that we need to be sensitive to the fact that although Jesus may have healed and saved from the grave a few people throughout the course of his ministry, he did not do so for himself. In his acceptance of the cross, Jesus revealed the ultimate compassion and grace of God, by giving his own life in death, for our ultimate healing. By taking our sins upon himself, Jesus entered into death, and was buried, just like we bury our own loved ones. Yet on the third day, God raised Jesus from the grave, victorious over sin and death for all who embrace in faith, their baptism.

Is this not what Paul says in the sixth chapter his letter to the Romans? Paul writes, “Do you not know, that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

It is an assurance that Paul earlier gave to the Thessalonian church, when they were beginning to experience the pain of grief over the death of their faithful members, who believed in the imminent return of our crucified risen and ascended Lord, to save them from death. Here, Paul writes, “We would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who have died in the faith, that you may not grieve as others do, who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

And what is that hope to which Paul admonishes us to cling? It is our hope, that through our faith and baptism into our Lord’s death and resurrection, Jesus has already taken hold of our funeral bier, taken our uncleanness upon himself,

and will not let go. It is as if he says to us, even though in grief, you may bury the bodies of those whom you love, know that I have their life in my hands, and I will say to them, rise and live with me.

And it is not just in death that we experience this promise of our crucified and risen Lord. I believe that he is present to us in all of the trial and tribulations that we encounter in life. Jesus compassionately cares for each and every one of us, as he demonstrated in that miracle at Nain. I believe that no matter what ills may come our way, God in Christ, through the power of his Holy Spirit, wants us to know his eternal presence is with us, and that through his grace, offers us the hope of new life. Amen.