

Sermon – Luke 7:11-17
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“A Funeral Gone Wrong”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Like many of you, I’ve attended more funerals of late than I’d prefer. After all, a funeral occurs because a loved one has died. There is felt absence, and there is sorrow. On the other hand, funerals, at least here at Grace, are wonderful, thoughtful, Christ-centered celebrations of the promise of resurrection. While I would prefer to have fewer of them, I also delight in each one – each an opportunity to thank God for the life of the deceased and to celebrate the hope we share. But however much I appreciate funerals, I think it’s safe to say that there are those who appreciate them even more. Take, for example, a man from New Zealand known as the “Grim Eater.” Six years ago, the Harbour City Funeral Home began to notice this man. A lot. He was showing up to three or four funerals a week, for weeks on end. There is, of course, nothing illegal about this; perhaps, they might have thought, he was a deeply spiritual man who enjoyed a good sermon. But his motives were eventually revealed when a funeral director saw the man unzip his backpack, take out some Tupperware containers, and begin to fill them up at the funeral lunch. Needless to say, the “Grim Eater’s” photo was soon distributed throughout the area so that others could be on the lookout for him. I have to admit that, before hearing this tale, I was familiar with the idea of wedding crashers, but a funeral crasher seemed unthinkable. I suppose not.

2. Then again, funeral crashing goes back to New Testament times. It was, after all, one of Jesus' favorite activities. The first occurrence, in fact, is from today's gospel reading. The scene is easy enough to imagine. Jesus is approaching a city called Nain with his disciples and a large crowd. But the gate to the city is clogged with another large crowd – a funeral procession for a dead man. The only family present is the man's mother, a widow come to bury her only son. And all is going just as would be expected. The mother, of course, is crying. How could she not? The arrangements have all been made just so, probably even including professional mourners, people hired to weep and wail in just the right way. Most normal of all, tragic though it is, this is life. A journey that ends in death. Except one for thing: Jesus shows up and ruins the whole thing with an appalling lack of decorum, with no sense of how these things should end. He even has the gall to speak to the mother, telling her not to weep. Has he no heart? Are her tears not a holy thing, not to mention the most natural thing in the world for a mother burying her child?
3. Jesus just has to go and crash the funeral, upending the whole procession of death. He speaks to the corpse: "Young man, I say to you rise." And the young man, who has no say in the matter, does exactly that. He gets up, and Jesus gives him back to his mother. Just like that, because that's what happens when the endless march of death runs headlong into Jesus' procession of life. Jesus attends three funerals, so to speak, and all of them come to a similar, unexpected conclusion; or, perhaps better, to a stunning lack of a conclusion, for the conclusion of death is undone. Not long after this funeral, Jesus will raise the daughter of Jairus. And, of course, near the end of his ministry, he will call his friend Lazarus out of the tomb. Jesus Christ, the Word of Life, speaks – and dead people listen; dead people rise. Robert Farrar Capon writes, "They all rise not because Jesus does a number on them, not because he puts some magical resurrection machinery into gear, but simply because *he has that effect on the dead*. They rise because he is the Resurrection even

before he himself rises – because, in other words, he is the grand sacrament, the real presence, of the mystery of a kingdom in which everybody rises.”

4. Of course, this real presence, this Word of Life, does not work in such immediate ways in our lives, in our grief. We continue to mourn our dead, to bury our mothers and fathers, to lament the deaths of our spouses and friends, to weep at the deaths of our daughters and sons. How could we not? The sting of death is sin, and sin and death continue to stalk our world and dwell in our hearts. But the funeral march of death has been met, once and for all, by the grand procession of life. Yes, when we gather in the wake of death, our tears are natural and even holy, our grief real and undeniable. But at such times, we gather not as a people without hope, for death has been swallowed up in the victory of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised so that we will be forgiven, so that we will live – so that the grave of death will be nothing other than the gateway to eternal life. After all, we’ve already died the most real death that there is. When we were brought to the font, as Elena and Leo will be in just a little bit, there is more, much more, going on than a ceremony featuring adorable youngsters; more, even, than a washing away of the grime of sin, as if that were not enough. No, in the waters of baptism you have been united with Christ in his death. In baptism, you are already dead – dead to the forces of sin, death, and the devil. And being dead, you’ve met Jesus. And Jesus has done to you what Jesus does to dead people. You have been brought back to a life that cannot be taken away from you, a life that our physical deaths cannot erase or deny. You are alive, because Christ is alive. Sometimes people in declining health will say that they already have one foot in the grave. Martin Luther liked to say that he was living with one foot already *out of* the grave, moving already not from life to death, but from death to life, in the procession of Jesus that knows no end.
5. Some years ago I attended the funeral of a dear teacher, the faithful theologian Gerhard Forde. The preacher was Dr. Steve Paulson, a colleague of

Dr. Forde's at Luther Seminary; near the beginning of his sermon, he pointed at the casket, declaring, "Our departed brother Gerhard has no problem that we do not already share." You see, even though dear Dr. Forde was physically dead, and we were not, he and we had already died to sin. Life had already broken in. Sin had already been blotted out. Jesus had shown up, and when Jesus shows up, death dies – and we, in Christ, live.

6. For this, you see, is simply how it is in the Kingdom of God that Jesus has inaugurated in his dying and rising. And this is what this resurrection, this miracle from today's text, is all about. Jesus raising the widow's son is not a miracle because it is something extraordinary happening in the midst of the ordinary. It is a miracle precisely because it is the ordinary way of God happening in the midst of our disordered, broken reality. Justo Gonzalez writes that a miracle is "the irruption of the true order – the order of the creator God – into the demonic disorder of the present world." When Jesus meets a dead person, the dead person always rises. The Kingdom breaks in. Families are restored and life, once lost, moves forward. These New Testament resurrections are not exceptions; they are foretastes of the feast to come, inbreakings of the procession of life that has turned back the tide of death and now marches all the way into the light and the life of God.
7. So the next time that we gather for a funeral, leave your Tupperware at home. Leave the funeral crashing to Jesus, for he will be there, as he is present even now. Bring your tears and your grief, but bring also your heart filled with hope. You are already dead and alive again in baptism. Jesus has shown up. And where there is Jesus, there is life. So rise up, friends. You who were dead are alive, and your life, hidden in Christ, shall be revealed in fullness, in the Kingdom of God that knows darkness or death no more.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.