

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our service last week we talked about amazing faith. A Roman centurion (of all people) had a faith that even Jesus was amazed about. We talked what an amazing faith actually is. We said it is a humble recognition of who we are: sinners who deserve nothing but punishment from God. We are unworthy of anything good because of our disobedience. That's the first part of an amazing faith. The second part is putting full reliance on Jesus anyway. We place full confidence in him because he is worthy. He has lived for us a perfect life. He died for us on the cross. In him we meet God's expectations. Despairing of self and trusting fully in Christ, we have an amazing faith.

Now, that said, even an amazing faith is challenged and shaken to the core when comes face to face with death. There is nothing more terrifying, nothing more difficult than dealing with death. And I know many of you here today have had your own encounters with death. Maybe a loved one of yours died... a parent, a brother or sister, and grandma or grandpa... and the hardest one, the death of one of your children.

Maybe the encounter with death was your own. A car accident that nearly took your life, or a disease that may still threaten your life. When faced with our own mortality we will be shaken.

Even if God has spared you from a life-threatening situation or from losing someone near and dear to you, you still know what death is and how horrible it is. It has touched you in some way. You've seen the images on TV or the internet of the Gulf and of the death of pelicans, turtles, dolphins and more. Even the deaths of these animals can impact us profoundly. You've seen death on the evening news. At least 16 campers in Arkansas killed when a flash flood swept through their campground in the middle of the night. And about a week ago, there was the death of a 7 year boy here on Omaha when a tree limb in his front yard broke off and came crashing down on him.

I believe death is one of the biggest challenges to a believer's faith... if not THE biggest. Where there is death there is often sorrow and that can lead to despair and hopelessness. Despair and hopelessness are fierce enemies of faith. They mix like oil and water. In the soul being filled with despair and hopelessness, trust in the Lord is being driven out.

And so, I would encourage you to listen very carefully today to the word of the Lord before us. Whether death has got you shaken today or not, it will have you shaken some day. Our God teaches us an important lesson today about what happens when "Life and Hope Meet Death and Despair."

Soon after Jesus had healed the Roman centurion's servant, Jesus was heading toward a town called Nain. Jesus often traveled from town to town teaching the people and doing miracles. As far as the disciples knew, this trip to the town was no different than any other. I'm sure the journey was also like every other. Jesus would be using this walking time with his disciples to teach them about the ways of God and the love of God. For the disciples this day and this walk were very routine.

But now let's flash over to the city of Nain itself. Inside those city walls there was a woman who was overwhelmed with sorrow. Tragedy and great sadness had struck her life not once but twice. Her husband was already dead. You can imagine the grief and her loss when she had to bury her husband. But tragedy struck again when her son – her only son – also died.

Now, experts say that although it's very difficult to cope with the loss of any loved one, it is most difficult to come to grips with the death of one of your children. I know there are some here who *have* lost children and I know you will agree. It's something that changes you, and even though you move on with your life, you never fully get over it.

Not only was this woman dealing with the tremendous grief of losing her son, she had lost her *only* son. She had no one else... no other children. This son was it. In a sense, when her son died, her whole family died. She was the only one left. Her anguish must have broken the hearts of everyone who saw her. And if this all wasn't bad enough, in those days, widows had a very hard time surviving. They couldn't usually find gainful employment. They had to live a life begging... a life depending on the good will of others. On top of everything else, she had that hanging over her as well.

Every funeral is difficult and very sad, but this one especially for all the reasons just mentioned. I would imagine there was not a dry eye in that procession. I would imagine there was a lot of soul searching going on by all in that procession. Perhaps some were contemplating how unfair this death seemed to be. I'm sure many were contemplating the shortness of life, and were thinking of their own limited number of days on earth. How long would it be before they were the ones carried out the city gate with mourners all around?

In a sense aren't we also part of that funeral procession heading out of Nain? We also live in this world of death. Sooner or later all of our lives are touched by death. Truth of the matter is, every last one of us heading toward the cemetery. We live in a society where death, though reported about, is distant. Until it hits our own family, we block thoughts of death from our active thinking. It's something that happens to other people and other families. We distract ourselves from thinking about it. We busy ourselves so much with life that we bury death deep in minds and close the coffin lid shut tight. Until we can't. And then what?

God would like us to come to face our own mortality this day. God wants us to see the reason for this horrible thing called death. The Bible tells us that death is what came into our world along with sin. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God, they became mortal. Death entered into the world for the first time. In Genesis 5 we have the first genealogy in the Bible. In this first genealogy we have something unique. A phrase is repeated again and again that isn't repeated in other genealogies. It says, "When Adam lived so many years he had a son... Adam lives so many years *and then he died*. Seth became the father of Enosh. He lived so many years, and then he died. Enosh became the Father of Kenan... and then he died. Kenan the father of Mahalalel... and then he died. The phrase is repeated 8 times because it's making a point. Sinful man dies. Your genealogy reads the same way. Your great great grandfather lived so many years, and then he died. Your great grandfather, grandfather, father... YOU... will live so many years, and then you will die. Death is the consequence

of sin. In 1 Cor. 15:56, the Bible declares, “The sting of death is sin.” This funeral in Nain could have been a funeral everywhere. Death is everywhere. A sobering downer, huh? But thankfully there is hope. Let’s get back to the story.

So the central part of our story, location wise, is the gate to the city of Nain. This woman, her dead son, and the whole funeral procession are heading toward that gate from inside the town, since the dead were always buried outside the city gates. Meanwhile, we have Jesus and his disciples traveling toward Nain. To enter the city they would have to travel through those same city gates. The woman was going out of the city because of death with a heavy heart, with great sadness and despair. Jesus was heading into the city: Jesus, the Lord of Life and the one who is the possessor and giver of all hope based on his good and sure promises. We’re heading for a collision at the gates of Nain. What would happen when Life and Hope would collide with Death and Despair? Something has to give.

“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’

First, I want you to notice the compassion Jesus had for the widow. “His heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” I fear that sometimes we get an image in our minds of a stoic and unemotional Jesus. In Eastern Orthodoxy that is exactly the image of Jesus that is taught. Every picture you see of him he is stone faced and unemotional. Friends, this is not the Jesus of the Bible! I always enjoy some more modern works of art that show Jesus playing with children and laughing! It’s so much more realistic! Jesus was a human being and he was emotional. Here was see his emotion pouring out in compassion when he sees this gut-wrenching funeral. He feels so sorry for her. His heart goes out to her. And then he does something about it.

Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.” You see Jesus was the true Son of God with power and authority. And so whenever he met sickness, death or suffering, Jesus was compelled to do something about it... because he could. Jesus approaches the coffin and touches it. The pall bearers weren’t going to run over Jesus... they had to stop. Without fanfare or showmanship, Jesus simply says, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” And the man sat up and began to talk!

That was a joyous day for the widow of Nain. Her dead son was alive. She had a family again. Her son would take care of her.

But here’s the really good news. Jesus wasn’t sent by the Father to provide a short term solution for a few untimely deaths. Jesus was sent by the Father to provide a permanent solution... to end death’s power forever. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”** Satan hold the power of death. In what way? When we human beings disobey God, we are obeying the devil. Obeying the devil brings death and separation from God as a punishment. But Jesus, by his death, destroyed the devil’s power by taking the punishment of sin for us. Satan can no longer accuse us because our crimes have been punished. Time has been served. Not by us, but by Jesus!

And not only did Jesus defeat the one who drags people to eternal death... Satan. And not only did Jesus take away the cause of death, namely sin. But he also conquered death itself. In his resurrection, Jesus walked out of and away from the grave. Death couldn't hold on to him. And he promises that all who trust in him share in his life. Death cannot hold on to you either. One day you and all who trust in Jesus will get up and walk out of and away from the grave. He lives and you shall live too.

When life and hope meet death and despair, life and hope came out on top. You too have hope now in the face of death. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, **“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”** When it comes to death, hope overcomes despair and Christ, the Lord of Life, overcomes death. We do not despair, but have a sure hope in Christ Jesus!

Now the danger is we leave today thinking, “That’s good stuff, Pastor! I’ll be sure to pull out those words of hope and comfort the next time I have to face death in my life.” This message, friends, isn’t just for “then.” This message is for now. Take a look at the end of our text for today where we see the impact on the “now” for the people at that funeral. **“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.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.”**

When your life is touched by the Lord of Life, you don’t stick him in your back pocket and pull him out when you need him. No, you live your life sitting in his back pocket. Jesus changes your world... not just when you face death, but always! The people who saw this miracle of life were filled with awe and they praised God. They recognized Jesus for who he was... the one sent by God to help his people. Now they may not have fully grasped the extent of God’s help to his people that Jesus would give through his death and resurrection. Nevertheless, their whole life was touched by Jesus. As a result, the news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. Knowing what Jesus had done and who Jesus was and the help God would give to his people through Jesus, the people couldn’t keep their mouths shut. They had to talk about Jesus. News about him spread like wild fire!

Dear friends, it is my prayer for you today that your whole life has been touched by the compassion and power of the Lord Jesus. His compassion and power are there for you when you face the very worst: death. He forgives and delivers you completely from this great enemy. He gives you life. And because he’s there for you when you face the very worst, you know he’s there for you in every other circumstance too. You know Jesus, his power and his love. That changes your life now and forever. Now don’t keep quiet. Go, tell this news about Jesus to all your friends, your family, your co-workers. God has indeed come to help his people. Share the good news! Amen.