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Get up! Stand up!

1 Kings 17: 8-24 & Luke 7: 11-17

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 5, 2016 by Christy Lohr Sapp

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If there were any doubt before this morning, today's readings remind us that death is all around. If you watch the news or read the paper or even pay attention to the Congregation's prayer list, it is striking how many people are struggling with the realities of death. Knowing that death is so prevalent should make us feel better, right? Those who mourn are in good company. Those who grieve are buoyed by the fellowship of others. Those who watch and wait and pray are accompanied by many others who share anxiety for a loved one's health. The Psalmist writes that weeping stays for the night but joy comes in the morning, but anyone who has mourned knows that grief is not so elusive as this weeping. It lingers. It clings, and it rears its head or grabs your heart in the most inopportune times. So, for anyone who is struggling with an unshakable grief, this week's readings might be a little too personal. What we have here is the tale of two widows and their sons encountering death and life. None of these people merit names, but in these stories we can learn something about the healing and restorative power of our God. These stories teach us much about the power of miracles and the strength that comes from the Lord.

Let's begin with the widow of Zarephath. God sends Elijah to her in the midst of a great drought and famine. Elijah finds the widow outside of the city gathering sticks. When he asks her for food, she responds that she has none. More than that, however, she says, "I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." What a dramatic response.

This widow is, essentially, a zombie; she is the walking dead. She is starving. She is watching her child starve, and she sees no hope in sight. She is preparing to die because death feels inevitable. This woman gathering sticks for her last supper reminds me of the women in a refugee camp I once visited in northern Kenya. The land there was dry and parched much like this region of Samaria, and each family received only a small portion of firewood with which to cook. Women and children often ventured outside of the camp to collect any wood they could find, but the plains surrounding the camp were regularly picked clean. Water was scarce. Wood was scarce. Food was scarce. And, hope was scarce. "I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son that we may eat and die."

Unfortunately, starving women and children are not a phenomenon found exclusively in the ancient world or far off refugee camps. Natural disaster, climate change, first world greed – all of these things contribute to sobering realities about hunger. *Feeding America* is the largest domestic hunger-relief group working in the United States. Its 2014 report on hunger notes that 46.5 million Americans are in need of food assistance. Many of these are women, children and senior citizens. In North Carolina, it is estimated that one quarter of children are food insecure. This is one of the highest percentages of child hunger in the country. The child of Zarephath and his mother are here with us today. Do we hear God speaking to us through them – as God did with this widow and Elijah thousands of years ago?

Perhaps the first miracle we encounter in this text is the fact that this woman complies with Elijah's request for food. Like the widow of Zarephath, 81% of NC households receiving food assistance do not know where their next meal is coming from.<sup>1</sup> I wonder, if you were the head of one of these households, would you share your scant ingredients with a stranger on the edge of town? Can we learn anything about hospitality to strangers from this widow? She is of a different tribe and worships a different god than Elijah, but her sharing is an act of great generosity and an act of great faith which is rewarded with a miracle of abundance. For the first time since the region's drought – perhaps for the first time since her husband's death – this woman must feel a sense of security in the wake of Elijah's amazing re-filling pantry. She must feel blessed. How surprising it must be then, when her son falls ill. She had probably just gotten a sense of relief. She had just stepped away

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ncfoodbanks.org/hunger-in-north-carolina/>

from the gaping chasm of death. How hard must it have been for her to face that chasm again and how grateful and relieved she must have been when Elijah gave the revived child back to her.

Switch scenes, now, to the widow of Nain. We get even less of a sense of her life than we do of the widow of Zarephath. The only description is that she was a widow with just one son – a son now dead. This would leave the woman in a very precarious situation with no one to care for her and no means to support herself. Like the “Widow Z”, she might have feared that her days were numbered and that her own death was imminent. Imagine her walking in the funeral procession with tears streaming down her face. She had done this before at her husband’s funeral; she might have felt like a professional mourner. I wonder if in her grief she, too, was preparing for her own demise.

Luke described the funeral crowd as “large” which might tell us something about this family, and as the procession left Nain, it encountered another group headed into the city: Jesus and his followers. Following the success Jesus had healing the Centurion’s servant in the verses prior to our reading for today, we have to imagine that this was a happy crowd headed into a direct encounter with the mourners. Joy colliding with grief; for the mourner, there is not much that is more galling. No woman who has just lost a son wants to be in the presence of another person’s celebration. Jubilation and exultation ring hollow on ears that long for the voice of a lost loved one. Jesus senses this and has compassion on the widow.

This “compassion” is an interesting word. The Greek word literally means to be moved in one’s inward parts. This is a visceral and gut-level emotion. The Hebrew and Arabic words for compassion are quite similar: *rahman*. When God is referred to as al-rahman/al-rahim – this means merciful and compassionate. *Rahman* is also etymologically connected to the Hebrew word *rechem* – or womb. This compassion that Jesus feels is tied to the deep love rooted in a natural bond such as childbirth. He feels for this widow with a maternal love and it stirs him to the core. Knowing her loss, Jesus steps up to ease her pain. As he commands her son to get up, we see strong resonances with the story from 1 Kings, and Jesus, like Elijah, hands the young man over to his mother.

The relationship to women in these stories is worth highlighting. “It is interesting to note that (throughout the scriptures) almost all recorded instances of raisings from the dead were performed for women.”<sup>2</sup> And, God cared about these particular widowed women because God cares about the marginalized. There were few who were more marginalized in ancient times than women – especially son-less widows. In these stories, the scripture writers go out of their way to share examples of God’s favor bestowed on women and those who are cast aside. Here, as we see over and over again in the scriptures, God is actively engaged with and on the side of the sick, the suffering, the grieving, and the disregarded. We would do well to remember to look for the presence of God’s restoring love in the unexpected people and places on the margins of our own society.

We also learn in these readings that God’s love is revolutionary and breaks all of the rules. Elijah and Jesus risk defilement and bridge cultural and social divides through these interactions. Jesus touches a funeral bier. Elijah places a boy presumed to be dead on his own bed. Both talk to women who are unrelated to them. These are radical acts. We learn through these stories that God will cross boundaries and make an extra effort to comfort the disenfranchised. We learn that God cares deeply about the plight of the poor. We learn that God’s love will purify.

One of the most striking things about both of these stories, however, is that neither of them involves a resurrection. Rather, both of these are stories of resuscitation. According to the medical dictionary, resuscitation is: restoration to life or consciousness of one apparently dead, or whose respirations had ceased. Resuscitation is the resumption of life as it was – maybe with a few bruised ribs or weakened limbs. But resurrection is the raising of the dead into new life. Both of the young men in our stories today are returned to life as they knew it. They are returned to their mothers and invited to carry on as usual.

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Hoefler, Will Daylight Come?, CSS Publishing Co, Lima, OH, 1979, 94

Yet, there is another story of an “only son” whose mother mourns his death that teaches us more about resurrection. This is the story of Christ. Through Christ’s death and resurrection we are all invited into the miracle of eternal life. We are all invited to get up and stand in the presence of God. And while our texts today do not tell what happens in the days and months after these resuscitations, we do hear in them a call for the whole family to be resurrected. As Christ touches the biers of those who – like the widows and their sons – are the walking dead, our lives are transformed. Resurrected life implies a state of being in which the old ways are erased and new life begins. Sins are forgiven. Kinship is restored. Eternity is secured. In the lessons we read about today, if these young men merely return to the lives they left, then the miracle is lost and they have been resuscitated only to encounter death another day. The point of these stories is not that these people – the sons and the mothers – are returned to the lives that they once held dear. Rather, the point is that they are invited into life that is more abundant. They are invited to get up and make more of the lives that have been returned to them.

I wonder how God is similarly calling us to get up today. Are you living in a way that is marked more by death than by life? – the death of dreams, the death of justice, the death of kindness, the death of gentleness, the death of joy. Christ gives us liberation from the bonds of death – both figuratively and literally, but how many of us feel as if we are living resuscitated lives rather than resurrection lives? How are you responding to Christ’s call to stand up?

On June 17 last year nine members of Mother Emanuel AME church were shot during a bible study. Like many others, many of our own loved ones, these members of that Charleston community did not receive the miracle of resuscitation. But still they have been invited into Christ’s resurrection. On the anniversary of these deaths, churches in North and South Carolina are sponsoring a “Stand Up Sabbath”<sup>3</sup> by calling Christians of all walks of life to stand up together against gun violence. This is resurrection living – when people respond to violence with empowerment, when we turn grief into great compassion, when we are moved to the core – moved with a mother’s love – to stand up in the midst of grief and fear so that others may know peace and have life abundant.

Remember the collision of Jesus’ followers and the crowd of mourners outside the gates of Nain. “Before Christ comes into our lives, our experiences of living are symbolized by the funeral procession ... a slow, mournful march toward the graveyard. Then Christ confronts us, touches our lives, speaks the words, “Get up” and suddenly everything changes. Our funeral-like existences become festivals – lives of meaning and purpose filled with joy. We are literally given second chances to live.”<sup>4</sup> How has Christ touched your life? And what are you willing to stand up for? Will you stand up for justice? Will you stand up for equality? Will you stand up for non-violence?

When divinity touches our lives, “our funerals are transformed into festivals, our sorrows are turned into joy, and death is changed to life.”<sup>5</sup> Listen to the words of the Lord, “Do not weep,” stand up, and, let God turn your resuscitation into a resurrection.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ncchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Stand-Up-Sabbath-Flyer-with-SUSart-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Hoefler, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Hoefler, 103.