
Are You Alive?

Luke 7:11-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 9, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

All of the variables according to cultural tradition and custom are present in this story to signify what is going on. This is a funeral procession. We have the bier, which is a stretcher for the body. We have the bearers of that bier. We have the large crowd of accompanying mourners. We have the body being carried outside of the city because burials were prohibited inside city walls. This is a funeral procession for sure. But in this story, which only includes one dead body on the bier, there are actually two dead people. This is not just a funeral for a man, a “mother’s only son.” This is a funeral for a mother and a widow.

On the day her “only son” died, she died. In fact, per the custom of that day, the bereaved mother walks in front of the bier. She leads the funeral procession toward the final resting place of death, the grave. Ironically, this is her procession as well and not just her son’s so it is not surprising then that she is the leader; she knows the direction of death because she herself is dead. We hear a lot about motherless children and there is always grief and sadness when a child buries a parent. But how often do we talk about childless mothers? It seems like a tragic reversal, one of life’s dirtiest tricks, when a child precedes a parent in death and the parent has to bury their own child and see them travel from the womb to the tomb. This mother leads the procession to her son’s end just as she led the way at the beginning, at his birth. She has to bury the one who came from her body and blood, so when he dies, a part of her dies as well. And she is not just a mother. She is a widow. This is a double whammy.

We don’t know if she has a daughter or not but in a patriarchal society, it doesn’t really matter. As a widow with her “only son” now dead, her predicament is dire. The death of her only son is an economic catastrophe because she is a widow. She would have no legal inheritance and would be dependent on charity (Deut 26:12, 27:19; cf. Pss 68:5, 146:9) because her economic well-being was dependent on the men in her life. And now her “only son” died. With his death, she died a socioeconomic death. This is more than a stock market crash; her whole world crumbles with the death of her “only son.” This was her funeral too.

You can be breathing but still dead. God bless, Rose. She and I sat in a restaurant to share a meal together in the summer of 1998. She told me about her relationship with her husband and how he had abused her and her daughter for many years. Yet she remained married to him. At one point in the conversation, after hearing the horrific stories and seeing the flood of tears fall from her face, I said to her, “that’s not living.” Rose responded and said to me, “Luke, I died a long time ago.” She was a part of the walking dead like this widowed sonless mother. Like Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, when the bones came together, and there were sinews on them, flesh had come upon them, and skin covered them but “there was no breath in them”(Ezek 37:7-8), this widow is an empty shell of a person because she has died on the inside. A body is there but she is not there.

She is a “far echo” of her former self because of her loss. We know people to whom things have happened that have choked the life out of them and they’ve never recovered from the loss, the incident, those words, that someone or something that walked away, that death. It took their life away perhaps without even realizing it, and made their existence a living funeral. Wake up in the morning. Brush teeth. Eat breakfast. Daily exercise. Good job. Supportive family and friends. But are you alive? Some have lost their mind or personality for medical reasons and they are not the same people we knew. They look the same but have actually gone away and in the words of a poet, we “mourned [their] spirit, lifted from its shell”(Dorothy Thomas). Who we knew them to be has died. We’ve lost them and they have lost themselves. For all practical purposes, they are dead. Are you alive?

The son is dead but so is his mother. This is really a family funeral. But Jesus is not a fan of funerals. He attends this funeral to stop it and to destroy death, to put an end to what the apostle Paul calls “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15). Jesus does not want death to kill us. Jesus interrupts this funeral, which is a cultural violation, but God will do whatever God has to do to stop death. Emory university homiletics professor, Tom Long, writes that death is the other preacher at a funeral. Yet Jesus confronts death head on. He doesn’t run in the opposite direction. It’s a standoff with death at the city gate. Jesus has his large following, but death does too. He meets the widow first because she leads this death procession and when he sees her he is deeply moved. Death moves God to do something.

It is interesting, and even shocking, that no one asks Jesus to raise the widow’s son from the dead. There is no prayer request for resurrection. Unlike last week’s story, there is no mention of faith at all in relation to the healing. It’s almost as if they had come to accept the fact of death and all of its repercussions and implications in their midst. It’s easy to get used to death as the norm of life. Just watch the news. But Jesus takes the initiative because he can’t stand death in any form. What we have here is a generous act of mercy and grace, not a merit-based system of healing. As Protestant reformer, Martin Luther preached, “Thou art a gracious God, thou doest good also to them who deserve it not.” Jesus knows a need when he meets one. There is the recognition that, in the words of Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, one should “be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” One may be breathing but still be dead. One may attend church, but still be dead. An empty shell, housing a deep void. Are you alive?

Jesus is even more than kind for “when the Lord saw [the widow], he had compassion for her.” He has a deep visceral response as deep as his bowels. He is moved by the presence of death embodied by this woman and has compassion. The same compassion the Good Samaritan has for the man robbed, stripped, beaten, and left half dead on the road (Luke 10:33). The same compassion the father has for the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). In all of these cases, compassion for the one in need is the impetus toward action. This mother and widow, leading her own funeral, is like the one lying on the road beat up and left to die or like the one lost in need of being found. She has a body but it is clear that she is dead.

The compassion of God will not allow God to passively stand still in the face of death. So Jesus touches the bier, violating Jewish purity laws (Num 19:11, 16). He takes the risk and breaks the religious rules for the life of another. He touches death and transforms it into life because when he tells the young man to rise, “the dead man sat up and began to speak.” But his mother, the widow, never says a word. She never says “alleluia” or “thank you, Jesus” or “praise the Lord.” She is silent yet Jesus knows exactly what she desires. God knows what we need before we even ask.

Jesus “gave [the man] to his mother” (cf. 1 Kings 17:23). The death she died because of her son’s death was demolished. In giving her “only son” back to her, Jesus not only gave her back economic security and stability, he gave her back her life. By raising him, he resurrects her and you don’t need to understand resurrection in order to experience it. Jesus tells the son to rise but the mother rises as well. Her dead son and with him, her dead hopes, were made alive again. Her dreams for the future were restored when Jesus gave him back to her. What she had lost was found. The living funeral was over. A relationship she thought that would never be resurrected came back to life and returned to her. All it takes is one touch from Jesus to do it.

God wants to give you back your life. Just when you thought your life was over. Just when you made all of the funeral arrangements for your life, Jesus has one more compassionate move, one more loving word—“rise!” A hope thought dead. A relationship thought eternally severed. An invention thought never to work. Jesus can bring it back to life to restore your life.

This is not false hope in the face of the reality of many whose children never return home after they run away, or of children dying before their parents, or of hope unborn dying, or of dreams dashed and life tasting like

rotten meat. I realize for some it may seem as if they never get a break from the storms of life; it's one thing after another. A relentless assault of suffering and grief in which death is the theme of life. Yet at the same time undergirding this story is what we hear earlier in Luke—"for nothing will be impossible with God." Not a virgin birth nor a mother and widow having her life restored. As a Christian I am a prisoner of hope. We hear "it ain't over till the fat lady sings" but according to the gospel, "it ain't over till God says it's over."

This same Jesus, God's "only son," who will die himself and leave his mother says, "rise." And when he is resurrected, when he rises, he does so that we might live again, that we might rise. I almost titled this sermon "stayin' alive" in honor of the Bee Gees. Are you alive? I know you are here in body. But are you truly alive? Howard Thurman once said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." As you eat the bread and drink the wine, may you rise.