

Tombstone for Sale First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Luke 7:11-17 (NRSV)

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. [12] As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. [13] When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." [14] Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" [15] The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. [16] Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" [17] This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

TOMBSTONE FOR SALE

Some time ago a strange classified ad appeared in the newspaper of one of our cities. It read, "Tombstone for sale. Didn't die. Don't need it."

The details that followed in the ad caused a reporter to investigate and interview Art Kranz, the man who had taken out the ad. Kranz told the reporter that the tombstone had been in his living room for several months, but it was not his. It had been ordered by his sister after she had been told that she was terminally ill with cancer and would soon die.

His sister was an orderly person so she decided to make all final arrangements for her burial while she was still alive and able. She purchased a cemetery plot, made all the necessary arrangements for her funeral with the funeral home and even ordered her tombstone.

But, she didn't die; she recovered and decided that she didn't want to keep the tombstone. So she asked her brother, who had a pickup truck to move the stone and sell it for her. Her brother stored it in his living room and then moved it to the front porch. That's when he took out his "Tombstone for Sale" ad in the hopes of finding a buyer.

If we had a copy of the "Nain Daily Gazette" in from the days when Jesus lived perhaps we would run across a similar ad. "Tombstone for sale. Don't need it. Jesus raised son from the dead."

And perhaps there would be a reporter who would want to investigate the circumstances surrounding the ad. This is what he would have found.

FUNERAL CUSTOMS

For us funerals tend to be rather sedate affairs with muffled sobs and faces showing the strain of grief. Not so in Jesus' day. Funerals were an occasion to express grief quite openly. It was the custom to wail, beat your breast and cry out in agony.

Those funerals were probably like the ones we see on TV when a dignitary in the Middle East dies. Huge crowds are whipped into a frenzy of sorrow. I think their emotional displays belie an underlying belief, that is, when life is gone, hope is gone.

In Jesus' day mourning for the dead was a sacred duty. In fact one of the greatest misfortunes that could befall a family was to have no one to mourn a death. Mourning was an art form. The women would let out a shrill cry, and tears were shed at the proper moment as a part of an elaborate ritual. The mourners would don sackcloth and ashes, tear their clothes and pull out their beard and hair.

Mourners composed special poems for the occasion ... the longer the poem, the more important the person. This poem was divided into three parts.

First, there was the eulogy that testified to the good works of the deceased. Second there was the lament that explored the tragedy of the situation. In this portion of the poem the "why me?" and "why now?" questions were explored. And third there was a section that attempted to console the bereaved. The good times were remembered and the relatives were encouraged to carry on.

Music in those days was provided by flutes. I can imagine that this really added to the "otherworldly" nature of the service as the flutes sounded out their shrill highs and somber lows. Even the poorest funeral was to have at least two flutes.

Mourning lasted for seven days and to insure that it was done correctly "professional mourners" were hired to oversee the process. Women who led this process were often thought to have special knowledge and magical powers. They tended to be very jealous of their special place in society and disliked it very much when someone interrupted the process.

For example, Matthew and Mark record the story of Jesus coming to heal a ruler's daughter. But, when Jesus arrives the little girl has already died, and the mourners and the music for the funeral had already begun.

But, Jesus didn't think that it was too late. He told the noisy crowd, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." And how did the mourners respond to that statement? They laughed at him. The tombstone had already been ordered, and they were going to have a funeral. "Get out of the way Jesus. You're too late."

But, of course they were wrong. Jesus had a way of changing every situation, even funerals. The funerals in Jesus' day was all about paying last respects and emphasizing what the deceased had been. In many respects the people (as Paul would later put it) grieved as those who had no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Jesus brought hope.

THE PROCESSION STOPS

This was the scene as Jesus met a funeral procession long ago. There was wailing and flute playing and a noisy crowd carrying dead boy out of the city gates of Nain.

Nain was near Shunem where it was said that long ago the prophet Elisha raised a boy from the dead. But, no one was thinking about that right now. A young life had been destroyed before it had a chance to blossom into maturity. There was ample reason to mourn that day.

In the Scripture we learn that this funeral was especially tragic. The young man on the funeral bier was the widow's only son. In those days a woman had no legal rights. For example, in judicial proceedings, the testimony of women and slaves was not accepted. Women were not allowed to own property.

And so, not only had this widow lost her son, she also had lost any ability to care for herself in the world. We might think about the role of women under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a model of what her life might be like. Tragedy was multiplied by cultural conditions. Her tears that day must have been bitter indeed.

But there was a problem. The crowd going out met a crowd coming in. Jesus, in light of his recent healing of the Centurion's servant, had quite an entourage. And it caused a traffic jam like the one on A1A after the space shuttle blasted off last Friday.

Then, as now, the funeral was a sacred event and custom dictated that Jesus and his crowd respectfully move his disciples off to the side of the road and let the funeral procession pass ... much as used to pull our cars off to the side of the road out of respect for a funeral procession.

But, Jesus was no ordinary person, and this was no ordinary funeral procession. Jesus did not move aside to let the funeral procession pass. Jesus stepped in front of the procession as if to confront sorrow and death head on. And out of compassion he told the widow, "Do not weep."

Can you imagine the audacity of what Jesus did? Not only did he stop the funeral procession; he also told the grieving woman, "Don't cry." We often encourage people who are bereaved to cry. We say that it is good to acknowledge our grief and "let it all out." But, Jesus stood where no one else has stood before or since and said, "Don't cry."

Surely many in the crowd that day were flabbergasted by what Jesus said. Perhaps they thought, "So, who do you think you are Jesus? Only God can wipe away her tears now. Step aside and let the procession move on."

But, Jesus follows this up with something even more shocking. He went up and touched the bier, the coffin. And those carrying it stood still, horrified at what Jesus had done. The law clearly stated that "whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days." (Numbers 19:11) Jesus was not only rendered ritually unclean by this act; it was all the more shocking because he did it deliberately.

A FUNERAL TRANSFORMED

What did he do that? I think it was symbolic. Jesus is showing his authority. Jesus can say things that we can't say, and Jesus can touch people that we can't touch. Jesus can even touch those who have died. And because of that, funeral services are changed forever.

People, for the first time were given hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. People could do more than just remember the past and try their best to move on. There is a word of compassion that comes from above and beyond us.

Jesus began to speak to the dead boy as if he were not dead. Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you. Get up." Jesus called upon no other power or deity. Jesus did this on his own authority. Jesus said, "I say to you. Get up."

Once again Jesus confronts the people with his unbridled authority. Who can command the dead to rise? Who has that kind of power? Only God.

And the dead boy responded to that command. He got up and began to speak. His dramatic recovery was complete. And Jesus gave the boy back to his mother ... just as the prophet Elisha had done so many years ago for another widow. In this way Jesus showed the people that the power of God was not relegated to the past. God was alive and active in a new way in his Son, Jesus.

And so a funeral procession was transformed by Jesus. An occasion for mourning was transformed into an occasion for rejoicing. The people said, "A great prophet has appeared among us... God has come to help his people." And the news about Jesus spread throughout the surrounding country.

I liken this to those funeral processions that they have in New Orleans. On the way to the grave site, the music is somber, no improvising, just the low sad notes of despair as songs such as "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" are played to the steady rhythm of a muted snare drum.

But, once the procession reaches the cemetery and the final words are spoken and the body is lowered into the ground, a dramatic transformation takes place. Brightly colored umbrellas come out, and the snare drummer removes his mute.

The way back home is filled with lively tunes such as "Didn't He Ramble?" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." The music is spontaneous and filled with improvised runs and flourishes.

Everyone follows the procession to the cemetery because they know what is coming. Mourning will give way to rejoicing, and everyone wants to be "in that number when the Saints go marching in."

But, in Nain long ago the expectations were not so great. They had no idea that a funeral procession could be transformed into a spontaneous expression of joy.

No wonder the word spread far and wide. This was like nothing they had ever experienced before.

They had heard stories about prophets of old, but now the enlivening word of God had come to them personally.

TRANSFORMING THE PRESENT

Sometimes when we hear a story like this, I feel that we make the same mistake that the crowd and religious leaders made long ago. We relegate the power of God to the past. We might be willing to talk about what Jesus did long ago... just as the Jews talked about what the great prophet Elisha did when he raised the widow's son long ago in the glory days of Israel's history.

But, what can we say now? What would it take for us to say that "a great prophet has appeared among us?" What occasion would cause us to take the mute off the snare drum and let the horns play freely? Would another person raised from the dead make a difference?

Surprisingly enough even that would not make a difference in the long run. Oh yes, it would make the 6:00 o'clock news. There would be pilgrimages and special programs exploring whether it really happened or not.

But, eventually, as time passed the interest in this fantastic event would be less and less. Some would insist that it really happened. Some would say that it was a hoax. But, most would not really care one way or the other.

In the long run the resuscitation of one person from the dead would not change anything. Notice that I called this event a resuscitation and not a resurrection because this boy who was touched by Jesus and miraculously raised would one day have to face death again.

Death was postponed but not eliminated from his life.

You see, the point of this story is not to suggest that Christ would give us miracles like this if we only had enough faith. The point of this story is not to suggest that we can somehow cheat death and avoid our own mortality by showing superior moral fiber.

There was no faith shown by the widow or the crowd in this story. They would have never stopped the funeral procession if Jesus had not blocked their path to the cemetery. But, Jesus did. Jesus blocked the way to the cemetery, and that made all the difference.

Jesus in this action did what only God could do. Jesus raised the dead and in so doing he raised our hopes for the future.

God in Christ has compassion on us, and one day our funeral music will be changed into a jazz fest. One day we can all put our tombstones up for sale. One day we will be able to taunt death with the Apostle Paul, "Death, where is your victory? Death where is your sting?"

DON'T BUY YOUR TOMBSTONE IN ADVANCE

So, do we believe that? Do we believe the final victory belongs to God in Christ and not to death? Then maybe we need to begin the victory dance in advance instead of buying our tombstone in advance.

You know there's more than one way to buy your tombstone in advance. We've all heard stories about people who have "lost the will to live" or "died of a broken heart" soon after a mate passed away. Much of the self destructive behavior we see, such as drug and alcohol abuse is the result of having no real hope for the future.

The message of today's gospel is that Jesus offers hope. He blocks the road to despair and touches us in ways that change everything. The village of Nain was changed by the actions of Jesus. The people were given new life and new hope, and the same can happen to us as well.

When we think that it might be easier to grieve what we've lost, Jesus points us toward the future. Jesus leads us out of our loneliness and isolation. Jesus leads us away from a life bound by sin and guilt into a life filled with his amazing grace.

The central truth of the gospel is that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He leads the living as well as the dead to new life. Don't buy that tombstone too early. In fact don't buy that tombstone at all!

When I look out over the congregation this morning, I know that many of you have burdens to bear. Your problems and fears are every bit as serious and real as those that faced a grieving widow long ago.

All of us face very real fears. Our lives can be changed in an instant.

I found that out this past week. You bend over to pick something up, and life literally becomes a big pain, and you're prevented from doing all the things that you normally do.

But, are we going to live our life worried about what can happen? Will we live our life afraid to bend over or dance or play golf because something might happen? I think that life is too short to live in fear of what might happen.

I think that we need to give Jesus our fears and trust him to go with us and redeem us. We need to trust the fact that even when the worst happens, Jesus can bring us hope and healing. Jesus still touches us in ways that no one else can.

According to our lesson for today, Jesus can even change a funeral into a party, and Jesus can change our lives in ways that we can't even imagine. When we hurt, Jesus has compassion on us, and brings us what we need the most.

It is said that Leonardo DaVinci was extremely sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. One day on the streets of Florence he saw a vendor selling some caged birds. DaVinci couldn't rest until he went back and bought the vendor's entire stock. Then he opened the cages and set them free.

In the same way God in Christ has shown himself to be very sensitive to our hurts. He has compassion on us. And through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we see the cure. He sets us free from our bondage to sin and death. He replaces the funeral dirge with the joyful strains of freedom and life eternal.

And yet some of us still insist on keeping our tombstones in the living room. We insist on letting the joy of this day be drained by the fear of what "might happen."

This morning take Jesus at his word. Sell the tombstone and believe the promise. Receive the one who give us eternal life, life that begins this very day!

LOTS OF HYMNS!

Kim Buchanan in a sermon on this passage told of how her pastor's wife died suddenly when she was a teenager. Kim said that just months before she had died Mrs. Taylor had been at their home, the picture of health. They couldn't believe that the tumor could grow so fast and that death would come so quickly. She wrote,

"We were all shocked by the news when it came, especially we 8th grade classmates of the Taylor's son, Jim. The day of the funeral a quiet crowd packed the tiny concrete block church. It felt all wrong somehow. Friend's parents weren't supposed to die... especially fun-loving parents like Jim's mom. We entered the church sad, grieving, and weighed down with disbelief.

After saying a few words, Reverend Taylor told us what his wife had requested. "She wanted us to sing hymns," he said, "lots and lots of hymns at her funeral." The pianist began to play.

As we began tentatively singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' we looked around at each other. This just wasn't done in our little town. By the end of the intro to 'Blessed Assurance,' we realized that this hymn thing wasn't a joke and resigned ourselves to singing. By the time we got to the refrain of 'How Great Thou Art' we were singing our hearts out. And as the final chord of 'Amazing Grace' died away, I think that we had actually experienced some.

Well, most of us. At the grocery store the next day, I overheard two women talking about the unconventional funeral in those 'well I never' kinds of tones. "As a teenager, Mrs. Taylor's funeral and the comments of those women in the dry goods aisle taught me a lot about grace. Grace comes unbidden, often at the least expected of times. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We can't plead for it. It just comes.

What we can do is choose whether we receive it or reject it. We can sing with our teeth clinched or we can sing with our mouths and our hearts wide open."

I suspect that one of the reasons this impressionable young teen-ager decided to become a minister one day is because she learned to sing with her mouth and her heart wide open. She heard the call of Jesus that brought hope even during a time of despair.

What about you? Do you hear the voice of Jesus? Can you feel his touch? Do you believe that his song can transform us?

The word is still spreading. God is still with his people, and our world will never be the same.

Amen.

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