

A BRUSH WITH DEATH

Luke 7:11-17

Have you ever had a “brush with death?” That’s a familiar phrase—we call it an “idiom.” We know what it means.

Our doctor performs a biopsy—could be serious--we wait for the results; we experience a near-miss on the interstate; while hiking on the Appalachian Trail, we find ourselves in a lightning storm and there’s no place to hide (yours truly); or here’s one more—it’s time to teach our teenager how to drive.

There are many things that feel like “a brush with death!” Something like this also happens when we lose somebody we love—that’s a kind of “brush with death” as well. Some here today have recently experienced the loss of a family member or close friend. It brought death very near.

Luke 7 begins with the story of a centurion whose servant was ill. He asked Jesus for help, and the way he asked impressed Jesus. In response, He not only healed the man’s servant, Jesus also commended the centurion for his faith.

After this miracle, a crowd followed Jesus as he left Capernaum and traveled to the next town. Listen to what happened next, beginning with verse 11:

Luke 7:11-17 ¹¹Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹²As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."

¹⁴Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." ¹⁷This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

It's worth noting that the region where Nain was located included Nazareth, Jesus' home town. This was early in Jesus' ministry, only a short time after the folks back home had treated Jesus so badly following His sermon in their synagogue.

After hearing of the healing of the Centurion's servant and the raising of the widow of Nain's son, maybe folks were having second thoughts about what they had done.

Jesus was demonstrating some remarkable power through His life and ministry. The widow of Nain was certainly praising God that the Nazareans had not been successful in their attempt to end Jesus's life.

This comes from a book by Kent Hughes: "Joseph Bayly knew what the loss of a child was like. In fact, he and his wife Mary Lou lost three sons--one at eighteen days, after surgery; another at five years, with leukemia; the third at eighteen years, after a sledding accident. So when Joe Bayly wrote about the death of a child, people listened. Here's a part of what he had to say:

Of all the deaths, that of a child is most unnatural and hardest to bear. In Carl Jung's words, 'it is the period placed before the end of the sentence,' sometimes when the sentence has hardly begun. We expect the old to die. The separation is always difficult, but it comes as no surprise. But (what of) the child, the youth? Life lies ahead, with its beauty, its wonder, its potential.

Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young. The suffering that usually precedes death is another reason childhood death is so hard for parents to bear. Children were made for fun and laughter, for sunshine, not pain.... In a way that is different from any other relationship, a child is bone of his parent's bone, flesh of their flesh. When a child dies, part of the parents is buried....

I met a man who was in his seventies. During our first ten minutes together, he brought the faded photograph of a child out of his wallet--his child, who had died almost fifty years before." [As quoted by R. Kent Hughes in *That You May Know the Truth*, p.261]

Some of you know this pain first hand—and you are the only ones among us who could possibly understand and thus fully identify with this heartbroken woman in our text—the widow of Nain.

It seems ironic that the word "Nain" means "pleasant" or "delightful." On this particular day, anything good about Nain was overshadowed by something terribly dark, unhappy, and fearful. Because of the 23rd Psalm, we call it "the shadow of death."

As Jesus and His followers headed toward Nain, they met a very distraught crowd on their way out of town. They were mourning the death of a widow's only son, and doing so... without hope.

They were headed for the cemetery located outside the city walls. They were about to bury this boy--until they met Jesus at the city gate. I wonder if Jesus timed it to happen this way. Whatever...it was yet another opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate His power.

1. But what we see first of all is how Jesus demonstrated the **Power of Compassion.** Look at verse 13: "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.'" Other translations say, "He had compassion on her and said, 'Weep not.'"

She was devastated. Not only was there the pain of losing her child; in that culture, there was a social stigma attached to this. Losing an only son would have been regarded as some kind of punishment for sin.

If you've ever heard someone say to a person who was grieving, "God must be trying to tell you something," you know this mindset and the hurtful remarks that can be associated with it. Such comments lack compassion; but sometimes people say cruel and heartless things when trying to explain the unexplainable.

In our efforts to comfort others, we should certainly strive not to cause greater pain. Often, in fact, the most effective ministry that we can have with those who are grieving is simply being present, listening, and providing small acts of kindness and service.

But Jesus told *this* woman not to weep--which would not normally be a good thing to say—except that this was Jesus; and He was about to turn her tears into testimony. In His compassion, Jesus was able to do what we cannot do—so *He* was able to say what you and I probably shouldn't.

Listen to **Hebrews 4:15**, "**For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses...**" Jesus wasn't being insensitive. He's moved by the hurts and sorrows of people. He has compassion. He sympathizes with those who are hurting.

Notice how Jesus takes all the initiative in this conversation; and then He takes action, not in response to faith on *this* occasion—there’s no indication this woman even knew Jesus—so this was simply Jesus responding to the suffering of a stranger.

“Don’t weep” is easy for us to say if the pain is not happening in us. We may feel an urge to say it when the other person’s tears are making us uncomfortable. But Jesus told the woman not to weep...because He knew her tears would soon be unnecessary.

2. Here’s why: moved with compassion, Jesus now demonstrates His **Power Over Death**. While the rest of those with Jesus made their way to the side of the road to let the funeral procession pass, Jesus did a surprising thing and headed straight for the coffin.

Look at **verses 14-15: 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.

Often, as with the Centurion mentioned earlier, Jesus responds to a person’s faith. But here, without any mention of faith, Jesus raises this young man and returns him to his mother.

But the New Testament also teaches that something like this is in our future as well. Listen to what the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Thessalonica, said about this:

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words.” (I Thes.4:16-18).

We serve a powerful Lord and Savior. It’s His victory over death and the grave that gives us hope.

I ran across a story by Joyce Hollyday. She tells of a school teacher who was assigned to visit children in a large hospital. Her job was to keep them from falling behind in their school work.

This teacher received a call requesting that she visit a particular child. She took the boy’s name and room number, and was told by

the boy's teacher, "We're studying nouns and adverbs. I'd be grateful if you could help him with these."

It was only when the teacher got to the boy's room, though, that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to see the boy horribly burned and in great pain.

Though she surely wanted to, she knew she couldn't just turn around and walk out; so she stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher. Your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

The boy was in so much pain he could barely respond. The young teacher stumbled through that English lesson, feeling rather ashamed that she was putting him through such a senseless exercise—at a time like this.

But the next morning, a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher began apologizing, but the nurse interrupted her:

"You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had given up hope....until...the teacher visited with him. Everything changed when she came. In tears, the boy explained: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?"

Hope is powerful. The hope we have in Jesus Christ is a powerful force in our lives. He enables us to celebrate the gift of life even when all we see around us is pain and brokenness.

On the other side of the pain, there's life—resurrection! All things are survivable, all things are possible, when our hope is in our powerful Savior--the risen Lord.

3. Which brings us to this: the potential of Jesus' **Power in Us**. Look at **verse 16**: **"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.'"**

Now remember, these were the very same folks who moments before had been heading heart-broken for the cemetery. Now they're awe-struck by the power of Jesus. They're praising God.

What Jesus did that day was life-changing for them—which is the same potential that the power of Christ has in us!

General William Nelson served during the Civil War. He was involved in some fierce battles, but he wasn't injured in battle. Instead, the general was shot in the chest by a fellow officer after a heated argument between the two of them.

Realizing how serious the wound was, General Nelson had just one request: "Send for a clergyman," he said, "I wish to be baptized." It seems he never took the time when he was younger. He never had the time before the war broke out. But now, realizing he might not survive his wound, his priorities changed.

The one thing he cared about now was preparing for eternity. He wanted to be baptized. The story goes that the General made his profession of faith that day and was immediately baptized. Thirty minutes later, he died." [as quoted in Christian Times, October 3, 1994, p. 26.]

A brush with death—and some of you have experienced this--causes us to reexamine our priorities. Has an illness or the death of a friend or maybe a near-miss on the highway ever caused you at least momentarily to change what you think is most important?

We may shake off such thoughts pretty quickly; but, really, at the end of our lives, what means the most is whether or not we have settled this matter of where we're headed next—when we step from this life into eternity. Everything else becomes secondary.

What Jesus did for this widow and her son shouts to us concerning our Lord's power over death. The message starts getting through that death is not the end. No wonder the crowd was filled with awe. We should be too!

Of course, the story of Jesus doesn't end with this one skirmish with death. We know that Jesus went on to defeat death...for all time. Listen to Jesus in Revelation 1:18: "I am he who lives and was dead and behold, I am alive forever more."

Now hear the Apostle Paul's testimony expressed in **I Corinthians 15:54-57**, "... then shall come to pass the saying that is written: **Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is**

your sting? O grave, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Luke doesn't record for us the testimony of the widow whose only son was returned to her alive—but don't you know she had one! Maybe we'll get to hear her testimony some day.

I heard about a man who for years had tried many different religions and philosophies. Finally, he became a dedicated follower of Christ. A friend, who was surprised by his conversion, asked him why, after all these years, he'd become a Christian?

He answered: "It's like this: suppose you were going down a road and suddenly the road forked in two directions. You didn't know which way to go. Then let's say you met two men at that fork, one of them dead and the other one alive. Which one would you ask for directions?"

Only a powerful, risen Lord and Savior has earned the right to say to us, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in Me, though he dies, yet shall he live. And whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."** (John 11:25-26)

After saying this, Jesus asks a question--the most important question we can ever answer: **"Do you believe this?"**

Jesus is asking, "Do you believe that I am the resurrection...that I am the life? Do you believe that those who receive Me and place their faith in Me will never die, but have eternal life?"

On "All Saints Day," we remember with gratitude the lives of those who have answered by their words and through the testimony of their lives, "YES, we believe!"

Once again, we entrust the lives of these believers into the Lord's hands. We're comforted by the assurance that they are in His eternal care. And we look forward with hope to that day when it's our time to join them. Thanks be to God!