

Dead Man Walking

Scripture: Luke 7:11-17

Sermon by Rev. Dale Rose – Lake Joseph Community Church – August 14th, 2022

Today's gospel lesson is a story about a dead man and a funeral procession. Sadly, we are all familiar with death, because it is part of the ebb and flow of life. All of nature is a reminder of the rhythms of life and death. Spring and fall are the seasons of resurrection and dying. The older we get, the more we experience the passing of people we know and love. I want you to think for a moment about the first funeral you ever attended. Maybe you were a child or a young adult. I vividly remember the first two funerals I ever attended. The first was as a teenager in my home church. A young girl had died tragically and inexplicably in her sleep, and the church was full. The second was when I was a young adult, and I attended the funeral of my maternal grandfather. He was a great man of faith, who had a big influence on me during my childhood. He was a farmer who worked the land his whole life. I had the privilege of reading one of his favourite scriptures and saying a few words at his funeral. That memory has always stayed with me.

Even though we have all experienced bereavement and grief in our lives, we don't like to talk much about it. But it is a reality for us all. Some people deal with it on a daily basis. For example, those who work in the funeral industry. But there are some people who regularly deal with death under unusual circumstances. Back in the early 1980's – on a sweltering afternoon on the streets of New Orleans – a man approached a woman with some papers in hand. He asked the woman if she would agree to write letters to a man on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Without giving it much thought, the woman agreed. She was used to people asking for favours. She had lived in a rough part of town for years where her Catholic order had sent her. It was nothing unusual for a nun to help people in trouble. So Sister Helen Prejean started writing letters, and developed a spiritual relationship with this inmate. It evolved into a powerful ministry where she became an advocate for humanity and justice. She wrote a memoir about her experiences working with convicts called *Dead Man Walking*. It was later made into a powerful 1995 film starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon. Prior to the 1960's, the phrase "dead man walking" was used to refer to a death row inmate making his final walk to the execution chamber. As the guards led the condemned man down the hallway they would call out: "Dead man walking!" The phrase has since come to describe those who may be alive in body and walking, but who are dead in spirit.

Our gospel lesson for today is a story about a dead man walking – literally. The context is important here. The passage immediately preceding this one is the story of Jesus healing the slave of the centurion in Capernaum. Jesus is about to go to

the centurion's home, but the soldier refuses. He doesn't feel worthy for Jesus to come under his roof. "But just say the word, Lord, and my servant will be healed." Jesus is so impressed with the man's faith that he heals the servant from afar. Jesus then continues on his ministry journey with the disciples. They come to the town of Nain. The name literally means "lovely or pleasant." It can also refer to green pastures, as in the 23rd Psalm. But on this day there was nothing beautiful about Nain for one woman. There was only sorrow.

Jesus and his disciples are entering the town. There is a large crowd with them. As they approach the town gate, there is a smaller procession coming out – a funeral. It is a young man whose mother is a widow. Already bereft of her husband, she has now lost her only son. Jesus then does something very unusual – perhaps even unheard of in those days. He interrupts the funeral of someone he doesn't even know. Now of course Jesus has compassion on her. But then he does some unusual things. He tells her not to weep. Now I'm no expert on grief counselling, but to tell someone not to cry at a funeral doesn't seem right. People need to grieve. Then he touches the coffin – a real taboo for a rabbi in those days. It would make him ritually unclean. But then the most outrageous thing is he says to the dead person: "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And the dead man comes back to life and is reunited with his mother.

The reaction of crowd is interesting. It says: "Fear seized all of them." And not just "the fear of the Lord" – that sense of awe and wonder. No – they were just plain afraid, trying to process what had just happened. Some of them may have wanted nothing to do with this man at first. Fear will do that to you. In one of his books, pastor and author Max Lucado tells the story of a missionary in Brazil who discovered a remote tribe in the Amazon jungle who lived near a large river. The tribe was in desperate need of medical attention. A contagious disease was ravaging their community, and many were dying. There was a hospital not that far away, but it would mean swimming across the river. The natives would not do that, because they believed it was inhabited by evil spirits. The missionary explained how he had crossed the river unharmed, but they were not impressed. So he took them to the banks of the river and placed his hand in the water. They still would not go in. He walked into the water up to his waist and splashed water on his face. It didn't matter – they were still afraid to enter the river. Finally the missionary dove into the river and swam all the way across until he emerged on the other side. He punched his fist in the air in triumph. He had entered the water and escaped. It was then that the natives broke into a cheer and followed him across.

Isn't this what Jesus did? He told the people of his day not to fear the river of death. He whispered life into the body of a dead girl. He touched a dead youth and brought him back to life. He called Lazarus back from four days in the tomb. Still

people didn't believe him. Finally he entered the river of death himself and came out on the other side. No wonder we celebrate the resurrection. As a pastor who has conducted many funerals over the years, today's gospel lesson resonates with me in some powerful ways. These ways are more indicative of hope than sorrow. And they all relate to Jesus and his ability to touch people at their point of need.

1) First, Jesus felt compassion for this grieving woman. Verse 13: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" Note those words – "the Lord saw her." This is a recurring theme in Luke's gospel. Jesus sees people who are often invisible to others – people who live on the margins of society. Parables like the Good Samaritan or Lazarus and the rich man deal with this theme. People like Zacchaeus or the ten lepers are examples of how Jesus sees those whom the world ignores.

It's important to remember that Luke was a Gentile writer. He was writing to a largely Greek, not Jewish, audience. To hear that Jesus felt compassion for this woman would have seemed strange to first century Greek and Roman readers. They were steeped in Stoic philosophy which taught that the gods have no compassion. Compassion means another person has power or influence over how you feel. If someone has power over a god then the god can't really be a god. Compassion was considered to be for the weak. Luke is writing about Jesus as the Son of God. This must have been a difficult concept for the Greek and Roman world to grasp. Yet Jesus has compassion on this widow. Here is a God who feels our pain, who understands our sorrows, who is also one of us. This must have had an appeal for those who thought God was far away and aloof. As Isaiah put it, Jesus was a "man of sorrow and acquainted with grief." The Son of God understands our pain as well, and extends compassion to his people.

2) Second, we notice that Jesus touched the untouchable. He touched the coffin and the body. Verse 14: "Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Jesus confronted the fear of death. And it's interesting to note that the first response of the people is not joy or praise, but fear. The word Luke uses for fear is the Greek word *phobos*, from which we get our English word *phobia*. And phobias describe our most irrational fears. Fear grips us when we don't fully understand a situation. It causes us to hunker down, to circle the wagons, to exclude people. Sometimes we are so scared of new life in ourselves or others that we want to return to what is familiar.

I remember years ago pastoring a church in Montreal when the Billy Graham organization came to town to hold one of their crusades called Mission Quebec. As you know, that organization had an extensive follow up process for anyone who came forward after Billy Graham's invitation each night. They tried to match people

up with local churches. I remember having a conversation with one of the organizers. He told me that some churches weren't happy because the Billy Graham organization were sending them the "wrong kind of people" – people who they felt didn't fit their congregational makeup. It was a sad commentary on those churches. They were afraid of change. Fear unfortunately becomes our default mode, because as one author puts it: "Fear is easier to feel than hope." Fear as an easy emotional state, and we can go there in seconds. By contrast, hope is more complex. It is not so much an emotion as it is a way of viewing our world. It challenges us to be creative. It demands better of us.

Jesus confronted the fears of the people in that funeral procession. Good people, good leaders, good churches deal in hope. It is the only thing that will truly last and make a difference in our lives.

3) Third, Jesus returns this son to his mother – and in so doing he returns her hope and future. Verse 15: "The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother." Perhaps there is no more beautiful verse in the gospels than this: "Jesus gave the young man back to his mother." But Jesus gave her even more. The passage begins with a sad description. This woman was a widow, and her only son had died. This would mean she was now destitute. It was hard enough to be a widow in ancient culture. She would be very vulnerable. If a woman's husband died, she would then depend on her son. But now she had no one to provide for her. With her son's death, she also died a socio-economic death. Her whole world crumbled with this loss. This was her funeral too, in one sense.

The story which precedes this one is the story of Jesus healing the slave of the centurion. It is an amazing contrast. In that story, the centurion is a male and probably wealthy. He had title and status and most of all, was a privileged Roman citizen. By comparison, this woman was poor, a widow, and a Jew whose country was occupied by the Roman oppressors. Jesus raises her son back to life. But in so doing, he also raises her to new life. He gives her back her future, and fills her with hope again. It is the same thing which Jesus' resurrection does for all of us. It helps us believe again.

4) Finally, when the people witness this miracle, they recognize that God is among them. Verse 16: "Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying: 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!'" There is an interesting play on words here in this verse. The people shout: "A great prophet has *risen* among us!" They had just witnessed Jesus raising a dead man. Now they proclaim a prophet has indeed risen among them.

It says that when Jesus touched the coffin, the pall bearers stopped. Everyone stood still. The crowd witnessed an amazing scene. They must have talked about it for the rest of their lives. Jesus raised the man and gave him back to his mother. But none of them asked: "What about me? What about all of us who have experienced death and loss?" I believe something changed for the crowd that day. The rising of that young man was also their rising, and our rising and everyone's rising. Somehow they sensed that this event was as true and real for them as the widow and her son. They recognized God's presence among them that day, and so they glorified God. The mourners that day became witnesses that Jesus has already given us everything he gave to that widow. Death is not the end or the final reality for us. Life is not determined by time, but by God. And in God, life is eternal.

Today's gospel lesson is one example in the Bible of "resurrections before the resurrection." In the Old Testament, Elijah raises the dead son of a widow. Then the prophet Elisha raises the dead son of the Shunammite woman. In the gospels, Jesus raises Jairus' daughter and this widow's son in today's story. And later he calls Lazarus forth from the tomb after being in there for four days. All of them resurrections before the resurrection, where Jesus conquers the grave himself.

If you are like me, you love to read a good mystery novel. I know a few people who like to read stories backwards. As they read a book, they skip to the end to find out how it ends first. In a way, this is how we read the gospels. We know how the story ends. So as the church, we need to take the resurrection story of Jesus and incorporate it into other stories of hope and resurrection. At its very core, the church seeks to tell these stories of hope to the world. The mission of the church is to show that new life is real. And as God's people we seek to silence the voices of fear which exclude hope. Like the crowd who rejoiced with widow in receiving back her son – may we too glorify and praise God for his rising in our hearts.