

Resurrection Life



Gary Wilkerson November 20, 2017

“Soon afterward Jesus went with his disciples to the village of Nain, and a large crowd followed him” (Luke 7:11). When Jesus approached the city of Nain, there was a huge procession behind him. He’d been ministering in the hills and meadows, healing the sick, feeding hungry crowds and preaching the arrival of God’s kingdom. Now many of the people he’d healed and fed joined his growing number of disciples. Try to picture this dancing, joyful throng as they approached the city: They must have looked like a massive caravan of joy.

Yet just as this delighted, excited crowd approached Nain’s city gates, they were met by a funeral procession on its way out. “A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow’s only son, and a large crowd from the village was with her” (7:12).

What a contrast. On one side was a crowd full of joyful unity and celebration. They had witnessed miraculous healings and food multiplied supernaturally. On the other side were mourners with just the opposite appearance, a people weighed down by the pains and sorrows of life. This group was mindful of tragedy as they bore a coffin that carried a young boy’s body.

Christians know both of these realities. On the one hand, we know the deepest, truest joy in life through a relationship with Jesus. At the same time, we’re fully aware of life in a world that’s deeply fractured, broken and desperate. We see marriages fall apart, loved ones struck down by cancer, children indifferent to the amazing gift of God’s love. If we aren’t facing some terrible hardship ourselves, we probably know someone who is.

This holds true on a national level as well. Despite America’s unparalleled prosperity, millions of citizens live in terrible poverty, including growing numbers of children. Like a funeral procession, the poor open their eyes each day wondering, “How am I going to feed my children? Why is this my reality?”

Imagine the contrast of the two groups in Nain as they run into each other outside the city gates. Jesus’ followers dance and sing his praises, “God is with us!” The funeral mourners must have been aghast at this, protesting, “You’re so disrespectful! Move out of our way.” Suddenly the celebrators grow quiet, saying, “We’re sorry, we didn’t know there was a funeral.”

So, what did Jesus do when he saw the procession of mourners? “When the Lord saw (the bereft widow), his heart overflowed with compassion” (7:13). Christ said, “Wait a minute. There is a need among us.”

As a pastor, I believe church life should be full of dancing and delight, laughter and, yes, fun. We should celebrate this amazing life we’ve been given in Christ. That may sound frivolous to you, but according to the Psalmist it’s the most natural response of all, writing, “The Lord is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving” (Psalm 28:7).

Yet even as we carry this great joy and express it outwardly, we need to be mindful of the heavy procession of many around us who carry burdens of sickness, loss, suffering and grief. In the midst of our celebration, we need to say as Jesus did, “Wait a minute, someone is suffering. Let’s shift our focus to the one in need who’s coming out of the gate.”

I'm sure the bereaved widow thought her world had ended. Her son had been her only remaining family, and she probably felt she had no reason to go on. How did Jesus minister to this sorrowful woman's need? "Don't cry!" he said. Then he walked over to the coffin and touched it, and the bearers stopped" (Luke 7:13-14).

Note what happened when Jesus moved in: Everyone stopped in their tracks. All Christ did was tell this woman not to cry, and he touched the coffin. Yet even in these brief, simple actions there was an obvious authority.

When any of us is called into a situation of despair, we are to do so with God's authority.

The Bible calls all of us to reach out to the needy with the touch of God's love. This calls for confidence. I don't mean self-confidence, the kind of inner rousing that makes us feel better about ourselves. I mean a confidence that declares, "Nothing is impossible for God." It's a confidence grounded in the truth that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead also dwells in us. And when God sends us into a grievous situation, his presence can change things.

Friend, if you like a good funeral, don't invite Jesus. He never came across a funeral in Scripture without raising the dead to life. What does this tell us? It says that for Jesus it wasn't only about compassion. Yes, the Bible says he shed tears for the grieving. But he also brought power and authority to transform what was dead, beyond all hope, and bring it to life again.

That is exactly our calling as ministers of his Good News. Jesus himself said we would do greater works than he did. And so, when we study his life and ministry, we do it not just to attain biblical knowledge. We do it to learn how to operate in the very Spirit of Christ himself—to walk, serve and love as he did.

This means walking in the authority he has given us. When Jesus preached, people remarked, "He speaks with such authority. We've never heard God's Word presented like this!" If our generation is to leave a mark for Christ on this world, we need to own the authority he gave us—to enter any situation with a confidence that says, "I'm here in the name of Jesus."

You may think, "That sounds so presumptuous. How can I claim to act in Jesus' name?" I actually felt that way for years. I grew up in a Pentecostal tradition, and I got turned off by a lot of the "power preaching" I heard. But several years into my calling as a minister, I realized I couldn't do the works of Christ's kingdom without his power and authority. Without these, everything was empty, dead religion. We simply can't be afraid of what hell spews forth into people's lives—to stand by consoling those who suffer without also lifting them into resurrection life.

Jesus demonstrated this when he saw the dead boy in the coffin. He said, in essence, "I am going to have compassion on this widow. And then I'm going to ruin this funeral!" "Young man," he said, "I tell you, get up." Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him back to his mother" (Luke 7:14-15).

When Jesus raised the boy from the dead, we see our Savior's desire to breathe resurrection life into things that appear beyond hope.

Jesus has never stopped doing such works. And he wants to do the same in our midst today—to confront all the pain and sorrow that come out of our city's gates with a power much greater than what this broken world knows.

Too many of us see a funeral procession and simply step aside, thinking, "Life is rough. I have nothing to say to these people's situation." But what if Jesus moves you to pick a fight with death as he did? Tell me, have you seen your marriage descend into coldness? Do you tolerate your kids straying into drugs, thinking, "God is sovereign. There's nothing I can do about it." Or is there a voice deep within you urging, "No more! I will no longer allow the specter of death to descend on my house."

Often when Christians claim, "It's all in the sovereignty of God," they equate God's works with Satan's. No! Our Lord is good, loving, a healer, a transformer, a change agent. He enters the city with life, love, joy, power and strength. And he confronts death with both compassion *and* resurrection life.

I know many Christians who look at their defeats and say, "God is taking me through these things to teach me something." That may be; he can certainly do that. But what if he's teaching you discernment? What if he's

showing you the difference between his sovereign, prevailing will and a dark spiritual resignation? What if he's showing you things to stir you to act in confident, living faith?

Friends, we're in a battle. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians about putting on the full armor of God, it wasn't a children's Sunday school lesson. It was because we're meant to pick a fight with the enemy, who won't give up until he sees our faith smoldering on the ash heap. The Holy Spirit has given us a sword to do battle in real life!

Now, some Christians will read this and think it applies to political confrontation. They'll pick up their Bible and march downtown to protest the removal of the Ten Commandments from a courthouse. Yet how many of those Christians can actually name the Ten Commandments? They don't realize the real battle Jesus has called them to.

Don't get me wrong—there's definitely a place for that kind of battlefield. But which is easier to say to the world: "You're walking in darkness," or, "I bring to you healing, abundant life"? Jesus asked that very question of the religious crowd in his day: "Which is easier to say to the crippled, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Rise up and walk'?" He then healed a crippled man to show the difference between the vibrant work of God's kingdom and the empty works of dead religion.

May we all believe, pray, trust and move into battle proclaiming the life Jesus has bought for us with a price.

Too many of us worry about failing if we step out in faith to confront the powers of darkness.

When I was a young pastor, I prayed for whoever came to me asking for God to heal them. Most of those people weren't healed; in fact, I usually caught whatever they were suffering from. But that never stopped me from praying for them. Here's why.

Two out of every three times I preach, I fail. And I can always tell when my sermon isn't good. Someone will stop me to compliment me on it, but when I ask what they remember from it, they get a deer-in-the-headlights look. Or I ask my gracious, loving wife what she thought about the sermon, and she changes the subject to the weather.

My point is this: What if preachers stop preaching because their last sermon was weak? We don't stop—in fact, we'll never stop—because we're *called*. We have to keep being faithful to our calling and rely on the Spirit to do his amazing, miraculous work.

There's another reason I've never stopped praying for people. Sometimes when they aren't healed on the spot, they at least know that God cares for them. And the seed of faith that is planted in them through prayer will sprout in time as the Spirit waters it. Our role is simply to be faithful messengers of his Good News—to present to the hurting a healer who loves and cares for them.

I reminded myself of this recently when I passed by a young woman standing on the roadside holding a sign. I don't know how to say this more sensitively, but her face was deformed by a huge growth. Immediately I was stirred to pray for her—but as I slowed the car to roll down my window, I suddenly got scared. Not only was I afraid the Lord might not act, but I didn't know how to approach her. I continued driving.

I'm embarrassed to tell this story, yet I do so to exhort you. If we live in fear, we'll never act in faith. My prayer these days is that the Lord will bring me across that young woman's path again—to give me another opportunity, trusting he'll be faithful to reach her.

Friend, we're called to believe that Jesus can reach the most hardened gang members, that he can heal the most deformed bodies, that he can perform miracles for "the least of these." If I can fail occasionally in the pulpit, then we all can fail on the ministry field. Even if we resist our calling because of fear, we can say to our forgiver, "Lord, I refuse to pass her by again. Give me one more opportunity."

Have you lost your confidence? Can you discern between quiet acceptance of God's will and a stir to action against darkness? Lord, teach us to love in your name. And lead us to walk as you walked, confronting death as it comes through the gate. You are faithful to bring resurrection life!

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