

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
20 September 2026
Luke 7:11-17**

A Funeral and a Resurrection

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—Amen

The text for this morning's sermon is the Holy Gospel appointed for today from the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, the seventh chapter.

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

Death does not win; death cannot win—in our text, or in our lives. The resurrection of the widow's son at Nain—as well as the resurrection of the widow's son at Zarephath and all the other resurrections in Holy Scripture—show the Lord's undoing of death. Death is the wages of sin. And Jesus Himself pays those wages in full in Himself on the cross—even though He, Himself, is without sin. He does so in order to make Himself a holy substitute and to forgive the debts of humanity and to reconcile humanity to His Father.

This boy's rising to life from the funeral bier also foreshows the bodily resurrection of all the dead on the last day. Just as Christ raised this widow's son on this day, so also will He raise all the dead on the last day. This is the goal. This is the end which our Lord's own resurrection has brought about. Human beings were not meant to die. The undoing of death which Christ has wrought finds its completion on the Last Day.

The boy's resurrection also foreshows the spiritual resurrection of baptismal conversion. We were dead in our trespasses, but the old man has been drowned in us and a new man has emerged and arisen. While this good work is not yet complete in us, it is, now, already real. We have been, and are being raised.

Finally, the boy's resurrection illustrates the promise of Jesus that He is, Himself, the Resurrection and the Life.

This account in our Holy Gospel also shows us a little something of what a Christian funeral is meant to be and how we are to conduct ourselves. Though we have the promise of the final resurrection and the assurance that the souls of those who depart this life confessing that Jesus is Lord will never die, we must, nonetheless, for a time, on this side of glory, suffer the sorrow of death. We should not pretend as though death were a mere passage of insignificance leaving behind an empty shell which we might mindlessly toss into a fire or the ocean or treat with indignity. We should not pretend as though the deceased aren't really dead as long as they live in our memories or that we are not sad. We are sad. Death is real. It is painful. It is a loss. The way we love people who have died is by mourning them. The widow at Nain committed no sin by weeping at the almost burial of her son. In fact, she would have sinned against her vocation and his mother if she had not mourned, if she had not been sad.

We do not treat the bodies of Christians in the same way that we treat the carcass of a pet or a deer killed on the side of the road. We treat the body with dignity. That is because God created the person a body. We don't believe in a pre-existent soul. Body and soul are created by God together. And while the souls of the faithful, which have been separated from their bodies by death, have gone to a better place, they have not yet gone to the ultimate place. They are not yet complete. They are waiting for us, and they are waiting for their bodies. Thus, the martyrs in Revelation 4 cry out: "How long, O Lord?" They are not in torment. They are not sad. They know no pain. Yet they are incomplete, bodiless souls. They are not yet as God meant them to be.

When the Lord redeemed us, He became not just a spirit, not just a soul. He became a real man, body and soul. It was in His body that He suffered many indignities and shame and was tortured to death so that we might be redeemed in our bodies. This is not just a spiritual reality. It is a bodily reality. We do not baptize the souls of babies. We baptize their bodies. We don't commune souls. We put the body and blood of Christ into bodily mouths where it is eaten and drunk. Faith comes not by thinking, but by hearing, and hearing is done with the body. All this should lead us to treat the bodies both of the living and of the dead with reverence and dignity.

Christian funerals are not, mainly, celebrations of life. Mainly they are confessions of what death is and of what hope the Christian has in the face of that death. We don't have funerals to convince ourselves that we lost someone wonderful and that he is worth remembering. Nor do we need to convince God to love the deceased. God already sent His Son to die for the deceased. He doesn't need convincing. And we don't need to convince Him that the deceased was a good person, that he led a good life either. Again: God sent His Son to die in order to declare the deceased better than good—to declare him righteous. This is what funerals need to confess. In the face of death, the Christian funeral proclaims the victory of Christ over death. It is, finally a mockery of death—a proclamation of eternal life in the face of temporary death.

But the Christian funeral must confess the resurrection by confessing in the first place that death is real and that death hurts and that death is caused by sin. In this, we also confess at funerals that we ourselves are dying, that unless our Lord returns first, we will all suffer physical death. Our bodies will age and decay and fail: we will die. And when we die, we must face judgment because the time is coming when no man can work.

It is only in the midst of all this, that the resurrection makes any sense. It doesn't make any sense to stand in the grandeur of a national park or a gorgeously maintained and manicured golf course surrounded by beautiful, young, healthy people and say: "O Death where is thy sting?" That is a denial of death. That sentence only makes sense if there is a body to be buried, if there are tears to be shed, if death has occurred. Because "O Death where is thy sting" is a confession that death has lost the war even though it won a battle. Death is real, but it is temporary. "O Death where is thy sting?" is a confession that Jesus suffered the sting of death to remove it from us. He lives and so shall we. And so shall all the dead who have departed in the sign of faith.

We do not commit our dead to the Universe, abstractly, or consign them only to our memories. We commit them to God's good acre, to the ground, in a cemetery, a word which comes from the Latin for "A house of sleep." We do this with the expectation that these bodies will wake up, with the expectation of seeing them again—not just as spirits in heaven—but we expect to see those bodies renewed and alive, back together with their souls, in a new creation, on a new earth.

So then, we ought also to give some thought to the hymns which we sing at funerals. We could surely sing the exact same hymns which are sung at nearly every American funeral. They are generic and light. Some of them have roots going back as far as a hundred or even a couple of hundred years. They tug at the heartstrings due to their many associations. And, in fairness, they come from a Christian tradition.

But if they're signing these hymns at the funerals of pop stars and at the White House, you can bet that they are not very explicitly Christian or particularly strong. We could sing instead hymns which explicitly confess the hope of Christians redeemed by Christ's death and

resurrection. We could sing hymns which go back hundreds and hundreds of years, even thousands. Hymns which have more to say, which are stronger, will bring more comfort in the long run and hymns where the text is more powerful than the music, or whose music hasn't been co-opted by the world, are to be preferred. We don't know what hymns the people of Nain were singing, but it is most likely that they were chanting the Psalms. We might do well to do a bit more of that also.

What we know beyond a doubt is that Jesus stepped into that funeral. He interrupted the procession. He raised the boy back to life and gave him to his mother. The Lord has a special place in His heart for widows and the fatherless and for those who don't belong to this world, to those who mourn, to those who suffer anguish and affliction—that is to say, for us. He says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”

The Lord of Nain is present at all of our funerals, too. He comforts those who mourn with real comfort—not platitudes about the circle of life or poems about the wind and the rain. He comforts with hope, with a promise, with Life. And He will turn sadness into joy. He will give rest to us as He already has to those who have gone before us. And He will raise us up on the Last Day. On the Last Day, He will say to all who mourn—just as he said to the widow at Nain, “Do not weep.” And He will raise all the dead in Christ and give us back to our loved ones. For He is the Resurrection and the Life and whoever believes in Him never dies. So, weep with the widow at Nain. Mourn for your dead. But do so in the sure and certain hope that on the Last Day, Christ will call you and all believers from the grave because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. David Petersen