

DO NOT WEEP

*A sermon by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.
Central United Methodist Church
June 6, 2010*

(Luke 7:11-17) 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.

THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

For those of you who caught the ABC evening news on Memorial Day, you might remember a report on Arlington Cemetery's saddest acre. Arlington Cemetery is the final resting place for more than 300,000 soldiers from all of America's wars. Unfortunately, section 60 of the cemetery is exceptionally busy as the result of almost 6,000 service men and women being killed in the Afghan and Iraqi wars. Memorial Day and Arlington remind us that death comes too quickly for some of our youngest, brightest, and best.

The 16th century, pastor, scholar and reformer Martin Luther was correct when he said, "***Even in the best of health we should have death always before our eyes.***"¹ In Jesus day, death was always close and certainly not as sanitized as it is for twenty-first century Americans. In today's world, medical professionals take care of our dying relatives and as soon as death befalls our loved one, the funeral home runs in and retrieves the body. Everything is taken care of and our connection to death is limited. In Jesus day and to this day in many other countries, a family member or loved one is involved in every step of the death process.

¹Source unknown.

Death was always close and it was common for Jesus and his disciples to bump into a funeral procession on its way to a tomb or public burial ground. It was also common for the deceased to be an infant or child. So why was this incident different? Why was this story canonized by the early church?

WHEN LIFE FEELS CLOSE TO DEATH

The story this morning is about a widow. She lives in a world where women don't count for much. The only thing she has that makes her life worth living is her son. Without him she is on her own, not a good thing in 1st century Palestine.

Her son gave her an identity and hope. Her son kept her from poverty. He shielded her from apathy and the injustice of others. There was no pension, social security, food pantry to provide for her survival. All she would have in her old age was her son. Her son was the difference between life and death. Now that her son was gone, she felt abandoned and alone. Surely, she felt overwhelmed and frightened. What would she do?

The early church must have felt this way. Their last hope was gone. Jesus wasn't coming back. What were they supposed to do? They were supposed to lead. They were supposed to make a difference in the world—telling people about Jesus. Jesus wasn't there and they had poor folks to take care of, widows and orphans to feed. Evangelism was a top priority but many of their best preachers and evangelist were in jail for preaching the gospel. Where was Jesus? Where was the one they had pinned all their hopes on? What were they going to do without Jesus? Certainly, they felt like giving up.

The story of the widow and her son being raised by Jesus was for the early church. It reminded them that the son wasn't gone. The Son was raised from the grave and he was walking around in the midst of their struggles. Don't cry, the story suggests. Hope is not lost. Jesus is the

same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Jesus will continue to be with you in the hard times. He will carry you when you cannot walk and he will feed you when you are hungry. Jesus is the one who knows all your troubles. God has not forgotten you.

That's all well and good we think because sometimes it just doesn't feel that way. The famous Notre Dame Football coach, Lou Holtz, who had a knack for making a point with humor and story used to say,

I've been on the top and I've been on the bottom. At Arkansas my first year, we won the Orange Bowl. Then everybody loved me.

They put me into the Arkansas Hall of Fame and issued a commemorative stamp in my honor. The next year we lost to Texas, and they had to take away the stamp. People kept spitting on the wrong side.

One year I tried to sell cemetery plots for a living. My wife told me I couldn't sell anything. She was wrong. That summer, I sold the car, our television, our stereo . . .²

Yes, sometimes we are on top and sometimes we are way down on the bottom. Maybe you remember the movie *Field of Dreams* about an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella who hears a voice that says, "**Build it and they will come.**" The voice also tells him to seek out the reclusive, but bestselling novelist of the 1960's, J.D. Salinger and save him. You quickly learn why he needs saving. He has lost his dreams and his passion for life. He's depressed. On the inside, he has died even though he is still physically alive. Through the contagion of Kinsella's vision that transcends all reality, Salinger is brought out of death to life. He is brought to a life that has eternal dimensions.

²Source Unknown.

It is a message that speaks to a time when so many people are struggling spiritually and emotionally. We live in a country where 1 out of 4 people never get time off from work. People are living on the edge and too many are falling off. Many continue to put one foot in front of the other but the pressure of family, work, debt and a plethora of other stresses has depleted them to the point that they resemble the walking dead. As one writer put it:

I used to think that people only died when they were put in coffins, but I know now that you can be dead and yet move and walk about and pretend to be like all the rest—some of whom are corpselike also.³

Wayne Cordeiro who is the founder and pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship Church, one of the largest and fastest growing churches in the United States, recently wrote a book entitled, ***Leading on Empty***. He writes in the first chapter that he was on his daily run when suddenly he found himself sitting on the curb weeping uncontrollably. He was totally burned out. The church and all of its pressures and responsibilities had brought him to the brink of total destruction. The presence of the resurrected Jesus helping him to rearrange his priorities eventually brought him back from spiritual and emotional death.

We forget that while we are Christians who want to make a difference we are also human beings that can wear and break down. The world was recently shocked to discover that even Mother Teresa dealt with these kinds of human issues. She wrote:

I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

³Donald Shelby, “Come Alive?” (Santa Monica Sermons, June 11, 1989), 1.

I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing.⁴

Yet, while she continued to struggle until the end of her life, she delivered hope to thousands of the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India.

People die every day.

- Not a physical death but they die on the inside from emptiness and loneliness, from fear and despair, from resentment and disappointment.
- Some people are spiritually dead today from grief and self-pity.
- Others die from an excess of self-centeredness and others die from an overdose of indulgent pleasure and materialism.
- Other people live in the death of failure, self-despising and yet others live in the death of sin, alienated from themselves, from relationships and from God.

So a popular media star confessed to a friend:

I am in the deepest kind of pain. My trouble is inexpressible, but revolves around the simple-sounding problem of wanting to become what I wish I could when I can't.⁵

The author and publisher Leonard Woolf revealed his living death when he wrote in his autobiography:

I see clearly that I have really achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of this human anthill during my 57 years in it would be exactly the same as it is if I had played ping pong instead of writing books, getting involved in causes, and

⁴Brain Kolodiejchuk, Ed., *Mather Teresa Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York, NY: Random House Publishers).

⁵Source Unknown.

*servicing on committees. I must have in my lifetime ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of senseless and useless work.*⁶

We can be in death, while assuming we are alive; we can be dying on the inside and still ***“walk around and pretend to be like all the rest.”***

COME ALIVE!

Maybe Jesus steps in sometimes to bring an immediate transition from death to life. I suspect, though, that most of the time we spend a season in despair before we slowly began to emerge. When you look at the life of Jesus, you realize he had a rhythm to life that involved work, ministry, play, rest and prayer. We would do well to bring that healthful rhythm to our own lives.

What is important to know is that the resurrected Jesus is here. He knows our and understands our depression, loneliness, hurt and despair. He knows that we lead lives of quiet desperation. Certainly, He felt all these things. Maybe that is why the Gospel of Matthew says Jesus was ***“sorrowful and troubled”***⁷ as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest, trial and death.

God gave us his Son because He wants us to be alive. God wants life not death. We forget sometimes that Jesus rose from the grave. We have new life and life everlasting because of benevolent act. Jesus does not ignore death and he does not turn his back on our pain whatever it might be. The good news is that God never gives up on anyone. God never says die. God says live.

Let me close with a story from Brennan Manning’s book, ***Souvenirs of Solitude: Finding Rest in Abba’s Embrace.***

⁶Victoria Clendinning, *Leonard Woolf: A Biography* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

⁷Matt. 26:37.

The headline in the San Jose Mercury proclaimed, *Fiancée Brings Him Back from the Dead*. The date was July 12, 1978. The story took place in Chicago.

20-year-old Peter Saraceno was not supposed to live. He had been out to dinner with a friend and was driving home. Suddenly a truck cut him off. Peter jammed on the brakes of his mother's car and it went into a spin. The car ended up taking out a light pole and then rammed a sign which collapsed on to the roof of the car, cutting it in two. The engine flew out of the hood and Peter flew out the car door. He was found sixty feet from the car lying on the pavement. His head was cracked wide open.

He was pronounced dead upon arrival at Westlake Hospital. The doctor felt a pulse one last time and found one—very faint but there. The family was told over the next few days that he only had hours to live but Peter, a Marine, continued to live.

His Fiancee, Linda Fraschalla, would stay by Peter's side for the three and a half months it took him to come out of his coma. She decorated his room as Halloween and at Christmas filled his room with lighted trees. On New Year's she celebrated with him alone. She filled the room with crepe paper and sixty-six balloons. And even though he could only follow her with his eyes, she had cake and at 12 midnight she put a party hat on him and blew a horn. The nurses thought she was crazy.

As he slowly began to recover, only Linda could understand his mumbling. She quit her job and took special training so she could care for Peter. With money she had saved up, she bought an outdoor swimming pool so he could exercise his legs and work at his physical therapy.

A year later Peter asked Linda's father if he could ask her to marry him. Mr. Franschalla told Peter, "When you can walk down the aisle, she's all yours. It took many more months of therapy but one day he walked down the aisle. Peter said he would never have made it without Linda. She brought him from death back to life."⁸

That's what Christ does for us. So weep no more. Christ is here. He is alive. He will never leave your side. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁸Brennan Manning, *Souvenirs of Solitude: Finding Rest in Abba's Embrace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 75-77.