

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 7:11-17

Get up!

He was her only son. Perhaps he was named after her late husband. Perhaps he looked like him. Either way, this son was all she had in the world. There was no more family. No one left to love her as only he could. He was her only son, and now his dead body, dead as dead can be, was being carried out of the town. How had he died? We're not told, but he was dead sure enough.

She wept. Who wouldn't? What did she have left in life but tears? Everyone wept. No, they wailed. That's how they do it in the Middle East. You've seen it on the news: a body carried through the narrow streets of some ancient city, women beating their breasts, screaming at the top of their lungs, men lending a bevy of hands to hoist the makeshift casket high in the air for all to see—a large crowd, a sea of bodies, a trail of sobbing sorrow.

Not merely a young man, he'd evidently been a good man. It seemed the whole city turned out for the procession. He died ahead of his time and, in him, the community lost a glimmer hope for the future, proof that the next generation had a shot, proof now prepared for burial.

And then they saw it through their moist, weary, reddened eyes. Another group was approaching, a large group, a whole town of people it seemed. They didn't carry a dead man. They followed a man quite alive. A curious spectacle they were, a ragged rabble following a modest rabbi. There was nothing special about his appearance. In fact, he looked like any laborer in the field or fisherman in the boat, and for good reason: He was but the son of a Nazarene carpenter.

It was bound to happen eventually. It was a narrow road—it always is when you follow Him—and a surreal game of chicken ensued. The groups were bound to collide, the funeral procession bound and determined to hold their ground, and this Man, for some reason, just as bound and determined to get in their way. What kind of madman disrupts a funeral procession? What kind of a man plays games with the grieving?

When He saw the mother, He felt sick. Really, that's what the Greek says. His stomach churned with sorrow. These weren't butterflies in His stomach; these were razor blades. Almost bent over in pain at the sight, thoughts of tears on His own mother's blessed face, tears He knew were not far down this road, flashed through His mind. What a monster death is! What a toll it exacts from the living, and what a nightmare it inflicts on the dead! He was more determined than ever to kill it, to put death to death once and for all.

Some of the men in the funeral procession began to fold their fingers, not in prayer, but into fists. They'd seen enough. Funeral procession trumps a posse of paupers out for a stroll. If this Man and His followers would not surrender the road, they would take it. They eyed down those standing before them. They were ready for a fight.

He walked up to the mother, touched her pale cheek, and said, almost begging her, "*Do not weep.*" Was He stupid or just plain crazy? Even His disciples were starting to wonder what in the world He was thinking. How can He tell her not to weep? Everything she loved was in that box, and they were about to put it in the ground.

Then He went to the coffin. He touched it, like a carpenter sizing up the piece of wood He plans to turn into some sort of new creation, running His hand down its side. Those carrying it came to a halt. Their anger had turned to complete confusion. Everyone just stared. No one had ever seen anything like this before.

“*Young man, I say to you, arise.*” He didn’t shout it, like a doctor speaking to a man hard of hearing. He didn’t make a show of it, like a magician doing a trick. He almost whispered it, like a friend encouraging a friend in a fight, telling him not to quit, telling him to get up and keep at it. “*Young man, I say to you, arise.*”

Never had there been such silence in Israel. And then it happened. The young man listened. Out of nothing, something came forth. The young man sat up and began to speak. What did he say? No one remembered. It was too much to take in at the time. They were lost in a daze of amazement.

Jesus took the man by the arm and led him back to his mother, presenting him to her with a look that seemed to say, “I think you lost this.”

And now your back on the scene, only this time you’re not in the procession. You’re in the coffin. You’re the young man. You can’t hear it, but your mother wails with all who loved you. Your friends carry your rotting carcass to the grave. You are dead, dead as can be. You are the man in the coffin. Pine box or oak Cadillac, either way you’re dead.

How’d you die? You were born dying, and then you killed yourself. “*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,*” Paul says (Ephesians 2). Sinful from birth, death was in your blood, but your every idol, every vain use of the Lord’s name, your neglect of the Word, your defiance of those in authority, your hatred, your lust, the harm you did to others’ reputations, your desire for you ought not have, all of it killed you. And now you’re dead, dead dead, dead forever, on your way to your fiery and eternal grave. You never saw it coming. You thought you had more time. You resolved a thousand times to get your act together. But here you are.

But what is this? A Man, an unassuming Man, not much different in His appearance than so many whom you’ve passed on the road or sat next to in an office, blocks your way. You are dead, but you aren’t yet buried. Many wonder what is wrong with Him. Behind Him stands a cloud of witnesses, the Church on earth with the Church in heaven. He’s told them to hold their ground. This is the ultimate game of chicken.

Once again, His mind races forward to His own mother’s tears, only now He sees more. He sees His friends taking down His own dead body from the cross. He sees them carrying His corpse down a dusty Jerusalem road, no casket, limp, pale, bloody, and lifeless, to a tomb. No one interrupts them. No one dries their tears. They set him in His grave and leave. Dead and buried, He sees His passion end. Tears, almost imperceptible tears, hide in the corners of his eyes.

He dries your mother’s tears. He begs her, “*Do not weep,*” and rubs His calloused, carpenter hands down the side of your casket. “*Young man, young woman, get up.*” He does not shout. He does not need to. He doesn’t put on a show. This is not magic. He acts so inconspicuously most might not even notice. “*Young man, young woman, get up.*”

And nothing becomes something. Blood-stained wood gives birth to a new creation. There’s power in His Word. There’s life in His Blood.

What are you waiting for? Didn’t you hear him. Get up, dead people! Get up! You, once dead in your trespasses and sins, have been made alive in Christ, alive now and forever. Your funeral procession has been interrupted today, interrupted by the one who called light from the darkness, by the Light whose crucifixion brought darkness upon the world, whose resurrection gives the light of life to the faithful. Get up. Get up and speak. Get up and live for Him. Amen.