

“Breaking news: life in funerals!” Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

You know that we have in our parish two funeral directors. And I assume that you all have been in funerals and know what they are like. Today for our Gospel reading we also have this description of funerals which took place in a small town called Nain.

It turned out our to be quite an event. Picture that you are in funeral, not much different that we have today, pall bearers carry the coffin to graveside and suddenly there is a man who comes to them, stops them and says to the dead man: “I say to you, arise!”

And the dead man would sit up and begin to speak. What would your reaction be? I imagine that funeral directors may choose to change their profession, and we may choose to never attend funerals.

But seriously, think about it, how would you react? The dead man being brought back to life again. Luke wrote: “Fear seized them all and they glorify God”. Sure, it makes perfect sense. Fear would be a normal reaction to this kind of experience.

You have never seen it before. You have never heard of it before. No one has. It doesn’t fit into your worldview, in how you understand what is possible and what is not. It blows your mind away. It makes you doubt what you experienced.

We can picture that people were pinching themselves to make sure they are not asleep and this is not simply a dream. It wasn’t. Something was going on, that didn’t fit in with what we know about this world and how it functions.

Fear. Fear facing unknown. Fear facing unexplainable. Fear facing powers which we can’t comprehend. Fear of confusion, for it seems that everything we knew about the reality is worth nothing. There obviously are things we don’t even know.

This is what the people experienced and it’s not hard to understand. What did Luke want us to learn from this event? Let’s see what can we learn about us and what can we learn about Jesus?

First, what can we learn about us? One thing is – that God's ways are not our ways. And our knowledge is not God's knowledge. Today we really know a lot, we have explored God's creation and have discovered a lot.

But even today is so many fields of research people are on the brink of discovering things which may force to reconsider what we have known so far. And all of this only with regards to God's creation.

What the people experienced and witnesses in Nain didn't belong to the realm of creation. It was God's intervention. Jesus simply gave us a glimpse of how things may change.

That what we consider unchangeable laws of creation, bend and bow as the Creator speaks. We need to keep this in mind when we think about the great mysteries of Christ. About the power of God's Word, about Baptism, about Absolution, about the Holy Communion.

Think about this! What they do and accomplish is as incomprehensible as what happened in Nain. When God speaks then things happen which we can't understand. Things which don't belong to the realm of creation.

When God speaks to you in Baptism, it changes your identity, you are made a child of God. When God speaks to you in Absolution, it changes your status from 'condemned sinner' to 'forgiven child of the Father'.

When God speaks to you in the Holy Communion, you receive His holiness and life and forgiveness and salvation. When God speaks to you a new reality is created, for true God is first and foremost the Creator.

The fact is, we need to be in awe and fear when we consider what happens in the Divine Service. The Triune God speaks. He comes to us, He speaks to us in Baptism, in Absolution, in His Word and in the Holy Communion. And when He does it He brings us life, eternal life, similarly as Jesus words brought life to the dead man in Nain.

There is one more thing we could consider about ourselves. The apostle Paul is very clear and emphatic as he writes: "You were dead in the trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1) He speaks about our situation before Jesus had addressed us.

This is how Paul describes the state of all people before they have received the Holy Spirit. Dead in sins. This is very important. This is how the Bible reveals the state of all human beings before they have been made alive by God speaking to them and sending to them His Spirit.

What exactly does it mean for us practically? First, rejoice! For your God and Saviour Jesus Christ has spoken to you, as He did to the dead man in Nain and now you are alive. By the power of God's Word and the Holy Spirit you are now alive.

You are not dead anymore, you have true life in you, and now you can gladly follow your Lord and Saviour, you can come where He invites you and receive His gifts, and because you are made alive by Jesus, you will live with Him forever.

Death at the end of this life doesn't matter for you. Sure, we all will die, unless, of course, Jesus returns before that happens, but our death is not important. For what we have received from Jesus is the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

You have the same Spirit within you. And you keep receiving Him whenever you hear or read the Word, whenever you receive the Holy Supper. And when the time comes, this Spirit will raise you in new body for life everlasting, exactly as He did with Jesus. Therefore, rejoice and be glad.

The second thing in relation to the reality that before Jesus speaks to us we all are dead in our sins refers to how we try to bring others to Christ. Remember, we were dead in our sins, before Christ spoke to us, and they are dead in their sins.

What can a dead person do? Or how can we bring a dead person to Christ? So often Christians fail to recognize this reality, that those who don't have the Holy Spirit are dead in their sins and can do nothing to come to Christ.

If someone is dead, like the dead man in Nain, what will it help if we try to be friendly, and invite them to parties, or share with them food and drink, or even help them and serve them and be present with them?

If you did all of this, would it make the dead man in Nain alive again? The answer is pretty clear. No, it wouldn't. What is the only thing that makes someone alive? The words of Jesus, God speaking to them, and as God speaks to them He also sends them the Holy Spirit. This is what can make someone alive.

Sure, there is a place and even a need for fellowship and friendship and service to others, all these things can help us to get to the point where we can speak to them the life giving words of Jesus.

But on their own, our activities won't make anyone alive. If we trust in what we do, nothing will happen, for there is only One, whose words have the power to bring a dead person to life, and that is Jesus.

Think about it, how great a thing it is that Jesus has entrusted His life giving words to us. When you tell someone what Jesus has done, then these are not yours, these are Jesus' words and as you speak the Holy Spirit is active bringing people to life.

This is so important to understand. We can't make anyone alive. Only the words of Jesus can, and we are sent to speak these words. This is what we have been talking lately more and more and we'll continue to learn how to do it.

This much about what we can learn about us. The second thing was to look at what this event teaches about Jesus. What is it? We read that Jesus saw what was going on and had compassion.

That was His compassion that moved Him to raise the dead man. This word 'compassion' has a specific meaning in ancient Greek. We could try to describe it as being gutted, as all our insides turning upside down.

Maybe you can imagine the feeling when you think about seeing something that really breaks your heart and you can physically experience the injustice and pain.

We probably can imagine it the best in relation to our loved one, to our children, when we see them suffering injustice or pain ... and we want to do whatever it takes to help them. Can you imagine that feeling?

This is how Luke and also other evangelists describe God's attitude towards us. He is the loving Creator, the loving Father. He sees us enslaved by sin and death, actually dead in our sins, and He is at pain how much He desires to help us.

This is what your God is like. On one hand, we are dead in our sins and rebellious against Him, ignoring and rejecting His care, stubbornly and foolishly doing things which harm us and others, there is nothing in us that deserves God's compassion.

But on the other hand, there is this compassionate God, His loving heart is bleeding seeing our situation and He is ready to do whatever it takes to save us. As loving parents can sacrifice themselves for their children, our Lord Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself to save you.

This is what you need to remember. Your salvation, God's forgiveness, eternal life with Jesus Christ, this is not something that we deserve, or can merit, or could even imagine. When we are dead in our sins, we don't dream about eternal life with the holy God.

In this situation, in this world, in this valley of death compassionate God comes to us, speaks to us His life giving words, gives us His Spirit, and does for us something that our minds can't even comprehend.

He rescues you paying for your salvation with His own life. And He does "all this [as Luther put it is the Small Catechism] out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." This is what your God is like.

Now, imagine that we were at this funeral. And we experienced all of this. What would we do? Would we still need some guidelines how to share it with others? Would we say, we don't know how to tell about what we saw.

Of course not, we know what happened and we would find words to describe it. This is exactly what we as Christians are sent to do. To tell what happened. To witness what compassionate God did for us and for every human being.

Jesus didn't only raise the dead man in Nain. It wouldn't help us much. He did so much more. We know that wages of sin is death. Jesus took all our sins on Himself, and nailed them to the cross. Then the Holy Spirit raised Him from the dead.

For death has no power over those who have no sin. Now, since you are united with Christ in your Baptism and in the Holy Communion, in the eyes of God the Father you are holy and pure, you have no sins left anymore.

Which means that death won't have power over you either. When the end of this age comes, the Holy Spirit will raise you from the dead to live with Jesus in everlasting blessedness.

This is what the Triune God has done. Much more than raising a dead man at a funeral. And we are witnesses of these events - of Jesus' death and of His resurrection. And as we share what God has done with others, the dead in sins are brought to life by the power of God's Spirit, and they will dwell in God's presence together with us forever.

And the peace of God which surpasses our understanding, keep your thoughts and your heart in Jesus Christ.

Amen.