



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Do Not Weep

Luke 7:11-17

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June 1, 2014 – Ascension Sunday

Think of the worst day of your life. Maybe it was a day a long time ago, maybe it was relatively recent, or maybe it's a day you haven't experienced yet, but that you know is coming and that you dread. Now remember that Jesus has promised never to leave us or forsake us. The one who came to preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, to fill the hungry, and to give joy to the sorrowful is there with us in the worst events we can imagine: in the loss of a job, in economic collapse, in the destruction of a reputation, in the death of a love one. Even in war, famine, and disease, Jesus is with his people to remind us that even on the worst day of your life, God is sovereign and we can still trust in his promises. Consider that Jesus is there with you in your suffering on the worst day of your life and he, his lordship, and his kingdom are made manifest by the trusting witness of faith that you and I give in the midst of our tribulation.

We see this in the story that St. Luke gives us today. It's found in Luke 7:11-17. As Luke tells the story, this next event follows closely—"soon afterward"—Jesus' healing of the centurion's slave. These stories follow immediately after Jesus' sermon—the sermon in which he taught his disciples that the new kingdom was manifest wherever its people loved their enemies and where, instead of judging and condemning, they preached *and demonstrated* the forgiving and healing grace of God. Through Jesus, God has given us not the measure we deserve—judgement on our sins—but instead a measure of grace. He's given us grace, pressed

down, shaken together, and running over and now we need to pour that grace into the lives of others—to those on the "outside" and especially to our enemies, because they're not our true enemies; they're only our enemies because they're still subject to sin and death. Grace is the release we've found from sin and it's the release our "enemies" so desperately need too.

The healing of the centurion's slave showed Jesus' power over death and it showed his God-given authority. Remember the centurion saying that he had authority of his own. He was Caesar's representative in Capernaum and when he spoke men obeyed, because he spoke with Caesar's authority. Just so, Jesus is God's representative and when he speaks and when he acts, he speaks and acts with God's full authority. And we also saw that Jesus wasn't kidding or speaking in hyperbole when he told his people to love their enemies. He was willing to share God's healing power not only with a gentile, but with a gentile slave who worked for the Roman oppressors—someone who was truly an outsider if there ever was one. Jesus took on the role of the prophet Elisha, who had healed Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army from leprosy. There were plenty of lepers in Israel, but Elisha didn't heal any of them; instead he healed a gentile and, more importantly, a gentile who was very much a political enemy of Israel. Elisha and now Jesus remind us that God's election of Israel and his blessing of her was supposed to be a call for her to use the blessings God had given her to bless the nations—something she'd forgotten long ago.

In this next story we see Jesus again as a prophet and more than a prophet. Luke tells the story to parallel the familiar story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. It shows Jesus again bringing good news to the poor. And it shows that as the Messiah he has full authority over death itself.

The story takes place in another small Galilean village, this one called Nain.

It's about 10 kilometres south of Nazareth. It wouldn't have been dramatically different from Capernaum, where the centurion lived. It was a small agricultural community of at most a couple of hundred people. Being close to his hometown, it's entirely possible that Jesus knew the people involved. Look at verses 11 and 12.

**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.**

People are starting to pay attention to Jesus. His disciples are following him, but Luke says that a "great crowd" was following him too. They'll be important at the end of the story.

As Jesus and this crowd approach the city gate they run into a funeral procession. The widow is at the centre of the story and the picture Luke gives us is one of total destitution. Jesus meets her on the worst day of her life. She was already a widow. She knew what it felt like to be touched by death. That's sad enough and most of us know what that feels like to lose someone close to us as she had. But remember that in the First Century there were no RRSPs, no pension plans, no Old Age Security. The local synagogue wasn't like the Church in the sense that the people she worshiped with would gather around to give her some support. That's a uniquely Christian reality. She had nothing of her own and was totally dependent on her one son for a livelihood. And now her son has died. She was like Ruth: dependent on gleaning the leftover wheat from the fields and leftover fruit from the orchard after the harvesters had done their work. She has nothing. She has no support, she has no connection with the local community, and she has no

social standing. She's become an outsider, maybe not religiously, but in most other ways.

In that warm climate the burial took place quickly before decomposition could set in. The young man's friends or relatives were probably serving as pall bearers, carrying his washed, wrapped, and anointed body to the burial place. It was "open casket" with the body on a bier. His mother, his only living family member, walked in front of the bier and they would have been surrounded by professional mourners—people crying out and wailing so that the young man's mother could cry and wail without drawing attention to herself. They were much less "clinical" when it came to death.

The procession was on its way to the family plot—probably a small cave. Inside there was a shelf on which to put the body. Her husband's body would have been there previously, but someone would have gone there to reverently collect his bones and put them in an ossuary or bonebox, making room for the son to be placed on the shelf. And as the procession made its way it would have attracted the people of the village, who joined in as it passed by.<sup>1</sup> It was a sad scene, but it was also a scene of utter destitution for this woman who was faced with the very real consequences of death in her life—not her own, but the death of her husband and her son and her means of support and connection with the community. This is the scene that Jesus finds as he and the crowd approach the village gate. And this is exactly what the woman needs. She's been left destitute by death, but Jesus is the conqueror of death and the grave. Look at verses 13-15:

**And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her,**

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<sup>1</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1993), p. 207.

**“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.**

In the midst of the deepest sorrow and desperation we can imagine, Jesus had compassion. The story isn't about the dead son. It's not even so much about the widow. It's a story that reveals Jesus' mission and ministry. He has come to manifest the compassionate love of his Father: to proclaim good news to the poor, to free the captives, to give sight to the blind, and to set at liberty the oppressed. These miracles in which we see Jesus doing just these things in literal and physical ways point to his much larger and more important ministry to all of humanity. He has come to release us from sin and death and from their eternal consequences. The fact that he could forgive and heal and that he could raise the dead are the evidence he gave while he was physically with us on earth and that evidence now gives us assurance that he has indeed forgiven our sins and gives us hope as we await our final resurrection and our restored access to the tree of life. These stories remind us that he is with us, even still, in all of our trials and tribulations.

Jesus does three things here and, again, in telling us about them, Luke deliberately parallels the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. That story is told in 1 Kings 17. Elijah had fled from the wrath of King Ahab and as he fled, God sent him to the village of Zarephath, where he would find a widow who would hide him and take care of him. As it turns out she was destitute. When Elijah found her, she was gathering sticks for a fire so that she could use the handful of flour and oil she had left to bake a final meal. She expected that she and her son would eat it and die. Like this widow of Nain, she was destitute.

Now here was Elijah, asking her to bake that last loaf of bread for so that he could eat it. But he promised that if she did, the flour and oil would remain as long as the famine lasted. And so Elijah stayed with the widow, hiding from Ahab.

Some time after that, the widow's son died. Elijah carried him to his room, put him on the bed and cried out, pleading with the Lord. Three times he stretched himself out on the boy, each time crying out to God in desperation to restore his life. Finally, the Lord heard and the boy came back to life. Elijah then took him down to the his mother, giving him to her, and saying, "See, your son lives." The woman responded to the miracle saying, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth" (1 Kings 17:8-24). The miracle was the evidence that Elijah was the Lord's representative—his prophet—and that he spoke for the Lord and with his authority. Remember that as we watch Jesus.

Now, back to Jesus. He said that he's come to comfort those who mourn—to restore their joy and to make them laugh again—that's the word of the Lord in *his* mouth. The first thing he does as he approaches is to tell the woman not to weep. This was an enormous breach of etiquette. You didn't stop funeral processions. If anyone else had done this it would have been seen as a sign of great disrespect. But Jesus is different. He tells her not to weep. That might sound pretty hollow coming from anyone else. How many times has someone tried to comfort you on your worst day ever by telling you not to cry. But it's different coming from Jesus. He's the one who has conquered the very things that make us cry and he's the one who has and will make them right again. He speaks for the sovereign Lord of Creation. Think of John's vision of the saints before the throne of God, praising him

day and night. He asked one of the elders who they were and was told that they were the saints who had passed through tribulation, through the troubles, the pain, and the sorrow of this world trusting in Jesus. And now they sing to him:

**For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.** (Revelation 7:17)

Jesus asks this widow to stop her weeping because he is the one who makes right what is wrong and restores the joy of his people.

Next Jesus moves from the widow to the bier carrying her dead son. Luke says he reach out and touched it. The pall bearers probably thought he was a crazy crank. They weren't going to let him stop the procession, but Jesus steps up and grabs hold of the bier and stop them anyway. Now, not only was this another major breach of etiquette, according to the law it rendered Jesus unclean: unclean for a day for touching the bier and unclean for a week if he were to touch the boy's body. But remember Jesus and the leper. The leper came to him, looking for healing, but no doubt keeping his distance. It was bad enough that he had come to town. It would have been inexcusable to actually touch Jesus. That would have left Jesus unclean and possibly infected with his disease. And then Jesus did what no one expected: he actually reached out to the leper himself. Jesus wasn't worried about uncleanness or about disease. There was no impurity and no sickness that could touch him. In fact, just the opposite, instead of the impurity infecting Jesus, his purity, his cleanness, his health "infected" the impure and diseased leper, driving the impurity from his body. And the same thing happens here. Jesus is lord over death. And so as he touches the bier—and quite possibly the boy

himself, although Luke doesn't say—instead of the impurity of death infecting Jesus, the life of Jesus "infects"—is transferred to—the boy. Jesus speaks, "Young man, arise!" And the boy sat up.

Like Elijah he raised the widow's son from death. As Luke tells the story, everyone familiar with the Old Testament would make this connection. Like Elijah, Jesus is the Lord's prophet. He speaks for God; he bears his authority on earth. And yet Luke reveals a difference. Elijah pleaded with the Lord in prayer. He went through an elaborate ritual of stretching himself out on the boy's body as he prayed over and over for the Lord to restore the boy to life. But Jesus restores this boy to life with a touch and a word. There's nothing here of Elijah's desperation. There's no uncertainty. There's no pleading with God. Jesus simply touches and speaks and the boy sits up and begins speaking. Jesus is a prophet and more than a prophet. The people probably didn't fully understand what it all meant on that particular day, but Luke is setting things up. Jesus is God's representative in a way that no one else ever had been.

Finally, Jesus "gave him to his mother". The way Luke tells it, it's almost a direct quote from 1 Kings. As Elijah gave the widow's son back to her, Jesus gives this widow's son to her. He had met her on the way to the grave, weeping and destitute. He now sends her back home full of joy. It's temporary, yes. The boy will grow up and some day grow old and sick and die again. But Jesus shows the core nature of his ministry here: he's come to conquer death and to restore life to all those whose sin has made them death's captives. This healing is a physical foreshadowing—something everyone could see and touch—that pointed towards his real and greater mission.

Now, remember that there was a crowd with Jesus and his disciples. They're there for a reason. Look at verses 16 and 17:

**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.**

Fear—the Greek word is *phobos*, as in "phobia"—seized them all. This is the reaction people have in the Bible when they realise that they're in the presence of God or in the presence of his agents. Peter shouted out that he was a sinful man and that Jesus should go away. The holiness of God inspires awe and reverence, but it also inspires fear because in its presence men and women are immediately reminded of their sinfulness. And yet the people, as much as they stood in reverent fear, glorified God, Luke says. They'd seen something wonderful. They saw the joy on the widow's face. The people saw the authority and power that Jesus had and they knew that it could only come from God. "A great prophet has come" and through him they knew that "God has visited his people". That's a loaded statement. That's what the people had been waiting for—for God to "visit"—to return—to his people. They'd been living without his presence in exile for hundred of years. So this is an acknowledgement that Jesus must be the long-awaited Messiah. The crowd didn't understand everything that meant, but they understood enough to know that God was with them in some way, that he had sent his Messiah, that he was returning, and so they spread the word.

Brothers and sisters, we're now part of that crowd. The widow also represents each of us. Jesus has stepped into the worst days of our lives—he has visits us and makes his presence known to us—whatever it was that caused that worst day, and he

restores our joy with the knowledge that he has conquered our enemies: sin and death.

Does that mean the immediate cause of our sorrows is gone. No. Remember, as much as Jesus restored that widow's joy on the day in Nain, the healing Jesus gave was simply a reprieve of the inevitable. We all, including that young man, all eventually get sick and die. Jesus has conquered sin and set us free from its slavery, but that doesn't mean that we stop living in a world full of people still enslaved to sin. We still have to live daily with the consequences of our own past sin, the sins of the people around us, and with the consequences of all of humanity's sinful rebellion. Physical death is still a reality for all of us. St. Paul, in Romans, describes the whole of Creation groaning under the weight of sin as it waits for the consummation of Jesus' victory. What Luke reminds us here is that the pain and the sin and the death of our fallen world serve as opportunities to witness Jesus' victory to the world. We're the great crowd who has seen him at work and our duty is to "spread this report about [Jesus] through all the surrounding country." We do that as we tell others of his mighty deeds, but brothers and sisters, we proclaim his mighty deeds as we live in hope in the midst of pain and sorrow and death, because as we live in hope, we reveal our faith and our trust in Jesus and his victory—how we respond to the spectres of sin and death in our lives has the potential to witness to the world around us that Jesus has visited us, forgiven us, and given us hope in a future resurrection, a foretaste of which we've already experienced in Baptism and at his Table.

I was reading St. John's Revelation this past week. John's vision begins with a scroll sealed with seven seals. No one but Jesus was able to break the seals and open the scroll to reveal the wonderful things inside. But as the seals were broken, Jesus released—

amongst other things—four horsemen representing war, famine and disease. And yet as the vision unfolds and as we see the horsemen wreak havoc on the earth we see God's kingdom made manifest as the saints live through these great trials in faith. Human sin rampages through the earth, but none of that sin is outside of God's sovereignty. Jesus remains Lord and as his people trust in his lordship and in his final conquest of sin and death—which we see later in John's vision—the kingdom is made known and spreads. We're heavenly colonists and we spread the kingdom as we respond to our enemies with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In our trials we reveal our faith in Jesus. We make the world constructively curious and in doing so we draw every more people to Jesus where they find their own freedom in him.

Brothers and sisters, never forget that God is sovereign and in his sovereignty every trial and every tribulation becomes an occasion for him to manifest his glory and his grace. He was sovereign when the widow's son died and through the sorrow of his death, he gave an opportunity for Jesus to reveal his compassionate victory. The sorrow, the pain, the persecution, the death, even the martyrdom that confront the saints of God today continue to be God's sovereign means of revealing himself, his compassion, his grace, and his victory through his people. They are opportunities to remember that in Jesus he has visited us with his presence. They are opportunities to recall that our hope is in his victory over sin and death. They are opportunities to show the world the power of the faith and the hope that we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As St. Paul wrote to the Church at Rome: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a

resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). When faced with the worst day of your life, leave behind the works of the flesh and respond with the fruit that Jesus Spirit has caused to grow in your life. Weep not, but take joyful comfort in Jesus and his victory.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the forgiveness and life you offer through the death and resurrection of your Son. Remind us each day of his presence with us. Remind us each day that he has filled us with his Spirit and united us with himself. Remind us each day to live the new life of our Baptism and the new life you give at your Table. And as we remember, teach us to live in hope, giving witness of your forgiveness, of our life, and of your grace as we face the trials and tribulations of this life, daily giving evidence of our faith in the future hope you have promised. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.