

St. James Lutheran Church

**Pentecost 2**

**June 6, 2010**

**Richard Holmer**

First Reading: 1 Kings 17:17-24

Second Reading: Galatians 1:11-24

Gospel: Luke 7:11-17

**Life Meets Death**

Back in 1965 I was a freshman in high school. That was the time when the war in Vietnam began to escalate. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sent into combat. And, inevitably, hundreds – and then thousands- of them came home in flag-draped coffins. The televised coverage of that war made the violence and devastation especially vivid. I was well aware that the soldiers who were dying were just a few years older than I was. Their lives were cut short when they were really just beginning. It was all very sad- and also intimidating because back then there was a military draft system. In my freshman English class that year we did a unit on poetry. A poem, by Carl Sandburg, who was born in Illinois, made a lasting impression on me. The poem's simple title belies its potent message:

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.

Shovel them under and let me work—

I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg

And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.

Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and the passengers ask the conductor:

What place is this?

Where are we now?

I am the grass.

Let me work.

These days soldiers are fighting and dying in another war. There always seems to be another war. Of course, war is not the only cause of death. Death is as relentless in peacetime as in war. Just about all of us have experienced the death of someone very close to us- someone who shaped our days, someone who once exuded goodness and vitality. Just yesterday we had a memorial service here for Sven Jorgensen, who lived a rich and full life for 75 years.

Our readings today tell the sad stories of two widows: the widow of Zarepath and the widow of Nain. The burden of each of these widows was compounded by the death of her only son. Imagine the grief and pain of losing first a husband, and then your only child. Death is heartless and cruel.

Death is also relentless. The mortality rate is the same today as it ever was: 100%. We know all too well that death doesn't happen to some of us – it happens to all of us.

Yet this is not all we know.

We also know that in Christ, God, who creates life, redeems and restores life. Jesus did many things in his time here on earth. He was a generous friend, a wonderful teacher, a powerful preacher. Yet his central focus, his prime purpose is to bring life.

John 3:16 has been called the gospel in miniature, the whole mission in a single verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Jesus said quite explicitly: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10.

The Easter season is over, but as followers of Christ we never get too far away from the resurrection. We worship on the first day of the week because this is the day Christ rose victorious from the grave. We are an Easter people – every Sunday is a celebration of life and victory over death.

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Today's gospel is the story of an encounter that took place before Christ's resurrection – yet it is an Easter story because it tells of an encounter between the powers of death and the power of Christ. It's a story of two processions – try to picture this scene. Jesus and his disciples are headed for the town of Nain. A large crowd followed along behind them. As they approached the city gate, this large and lively procession was met by a funeral procession, heading out of the city for a burial. The procession of life runs smack into the procession of death. Jesus sees the grieving widow, on her way to bury her only son next to her husband, and he has compassion for her. He says to her, "Do not weep." (Which also has the spirit of Easter about it.)

Then Jesus does something extraordinary. Jewish ritual laws forbade touching a corpse or even the funeral bier. To do so would make a person unclean. Their understanding was that death would contaminate and diminish any living thing that came in contact with it. Actually, we have this same instinctive reaction to dead things, whether animals or humans. We are reluctant to touch them.

So what does Jesus do? He reaches out and touches the funeral bier! He defies the ritual conventions and turns the prevailing wisdom on its head! Jesus says: "Young man, I say to you, rise!" - as if it was the most natural thing a person could say or do. Instead of being defiled by the contagion of death, life flows from Christ to the dead son, and he restores the life that had been lost. That day, Jesus saved not only the son, but also the mother, because in that culture without a living male relative, she would have been doomed to poverty and destitution. Life meets death – and life is triumphant.

We hear such stories, and something within us says, "Yes, but..."  
Yes, but what about my son, my mother, my husband, my friend???

- \* We know that Jesus did not raise all who died in his time. Nor did he heal all who were sick. Full disclosure is that even those whom Jesus did heal and did raise would all eventually die.
- \* In our own time, we know very well that God does not intervene to rescue all who are in peril.
- \* You and I are living in the between time – the time between Christ's rising and his second coming, when all will be raised to life. We experience Christ's promise of abundant life as an "already" and a "not yet." We are already alive in Christ, touched by his grace, filled with the Spirit. At the same time, we are not yet free from the reality of death, not yet resurrected.

The reaction of the crowd in this gospel story is instructive. They are at first scared by what happens (who wouldn't be?), but ultimately they are thankful. We don't hear any one saying to Jesus: "Why her son and not mine?" "Why not my wife or my father?" Instead what they say is: "God has looked favorably on his people." (Note: not "this widow" but "his people") The crowd sees this miracle not as a particular, individual blessing, but a shared blessing – a gift to all the people, a sign of god's grace which will finally encompass us all.

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So it is for us. We trust the promise that in Christ, all will be made alive. Our resurrection to eternal life is still to come, but meanwhile we experience renewed and redeemed life as God's faithful people, living together in peace and joy.

The compassion of Christ that gives life and hope is evident in this congregation – especially in the face of death. Christ was alive here yesterday at the service for Sven and the luncheon that followed. I'm not being sentimental. The powers of death are met squarely by the powers of

life in Christ. The love, the peace, the compassion, the hope that are shared here are more than mere wishful thinking. They are the expression of vibrant, abundant life.

I have seen this time and again in this congregation, in the aftermath of devastating and tragic deaths. There's more to it than nice people being polite. It is the resounding "nevertheless" of the life we share in Jesus Christ.

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You and I live together by faith, encouraged and supported by the life of Christ. We don't hide from death or deny its presence. But we also refuse to be intimidated or overwhelmed by death. Yes, we are all mortal creatures. We know we are dust and to dust we shall all return. Yet we are also children of God – and so we are heirs of eternal life. We learned to sing this truth as children: "We are weak, but he is strong."

Death says: Shovel them under. I am the grass. Let me work.

Jesus says: I am the Lord of Life. Let me work.

The day will come when Jesus will speak to us as he did to the widow's son: "I say to you, rise." And we shall.

Thanks be to God.

Amen