

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, June 5, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 7:11-17

“Our Compassionate Lord”

Last week we read about the Centurion's servant who was healed because of his owner's faith, but in this Gospel account the only person who has any faith that the dead man can be raised is Jesus Himself. Though Jesus loves to see the signs of faith in others, He isn't always bound by it, and in this case He acts freely, from sheer godly compassion, to do something nobody there had imagined He could or would.

Listen to this definition of faith from Hebrews 11:1-3 *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”* Surely no one present that day understood that better than Jesus, Himself. Sadly, we can fast forward and make a connection between this to when Jesus is Himself carried off, His widowed mother's eldest son, for burial outside the walls of Jerusalem. The young man in today's Gospel is brought back to life and will have to die again one day. Jesus' new life, as He walked out of the grave, is one in which death is left behind for good! Everyone that has been raised to life, whether it is the young man that Elijah laid on top of three times, and prayed to God, He was raised from the dead; Jesus called Lazarus out from the grave when He said *“Lazarus, come forth”* in John chapter 11; Jairus' daughter who Jesus said was not sleeping – and to whom Jesus told to *“wake up,”* or this young man – all of those people came out of death – only to return one day! Jesus came out of death and left it behind – never to return – and He lives today! I want to suggest to you that Jesus' compassion for the widow may have been through His making a connection to how His mother, Mary might be feeling when He is crucified and buried – and carried to the grave..

Please imagine walking in the crowd a few paces behind the coffin, on a hot day in the Galilee region, with the bright sun shining on the tears that are streaming down everyone's cheeks. Death is common enough, and everybody knows what to do. In ancient Israel you would find that the traditional professional mourners and wailers are there, making plenty of noise so that the friends, relatives, and especially the poor man's mother, can feel free to cry their hearts out without the embarrassment of making a scene. There are people who are coming with spices to anoint the body, ready to wrap them up in the grave-clothes to offset the horrible smell of decomposition. When someone dies in a small Middle-Eastern community – everyone in that community is touched. The place of burial is a little ways outside of the town: probably a small cave or tomb in the side of a hill, where the husband and father had been buried some time before, and where now this man's body is heading to be interred. That is where the procession is going.

The Gospel tells us that this is in the town called Nain. How many here today have ever heard of Nain? One or maybe two! I have to confess to you that it is not on my top ten. I have been to Israel twice and I had no idea where Nain was. Today – you will find out that it is not spoken of anywhere in the Bible but right here in Luke Chapter Seven. The town called Nain was a few

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miles southeast of Nazareth and about a day's journey from Capernaum. If you drew a triangle from Capernaum and headed northwest to Nazareth, and then southeast to Nain, you would be able to see where that is. Jesus continued His teaching ministry throughout the land, training His disciples and being followed by a large crowd that went with Him from place to place. Upon approaching the gate of the town of Nain, they saw this funeral procession, which as by custom, was led by a woman and followed by the dead man being carried out and then a large crowd of mourners from the town. Jesus is looking upon this widowed, grieving mother, and something inside Him seems to be stirring. He goes up and says something to her – and then, to everyone's surprise and horror, He touches the open coffin. Jewish custom did not use a closed coffin. Also, remember, that no good Jew would normally dare touch this except the official pall bearers; because touching a corpse or the coffin would make you unclean, and have to remain outside the city for up to seven days, and then have to wash and ceremonial bathing. Then comes the biggest shock of all, Jesus is telling the young man to get up, and he's getting up. The whole funeral procession goes wild with astonishment. It says today in the Gospel that then men carrying the body froze; they stood still. Wouldn't you? They don't know which one to look at, the newly raised from the dead boy – who is now talking, or his amazed and ecstatic mother, and then again they might be looking at Jesus who has done what the old prophets, Elijah and Elisha, used to do – raising people from the dead. They said that day in Nain "*God has come to help his people.*" They are saying this in the old biblical sense, where this phrase was used to refer to God '*visiting*' Israel at the time of the Exodus and other great events. It means, '*God has come near to us, to save and rescue us.*' It means, '*This is the time we've been waiting for.*' May I also remind you of the meaning of one of Jesus' Names - Emmanuel: "*God with us?*"

The family's mourning would continue for thirty days. Today, Jewish people will take a seven day period called "sitting Shiva" in which the loved ones would not be sitting by the body, but would sit in a memorial – in which people would bring fruit baskets, not so much flowers, but visiting during this time. What made this funeral especially sad was that the dead young man *was his mother's only son, and she was a widow.* This woman had already lost her husband, and here her only son was dead. What that means is that in the days of Jesus is that she had just lost her last means of support. The crowd of mourners would go home, and she would be left penniless and alone. The widow was probably past the age of childbearing and would not marry again. Unless a relative would come to her aid, her future was beyond bleak. In the first century, it was very difficult for a woman to earn her own living. Without anyone to provide for this widow, she would be an easy prey for swindlers, and she would likely have to resort to begging for food. No wonder when Jesus saw this sad sight and the tearful woman, His heart went out to her. Remember as I reminded you in last week's sermon about the Centurion, "*Jesus cares about people's deepest needs – and He loves to heal His people!*" As Jesus' followers met the crowd of mourners, Jesus went to the woman and gently said, "*Don't cry.*" Jesus, the Lord over death itself, was going to change the circumstances. Jesus has the power to bring hope out of any tragedy. Jesus then spoke directly to the young man whose body that lay in the coffin as He said, "*Young man, I say to you, get up!*"

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This has tremendous similarity to John chapter eleven when Jesus tells another dead man- "*Lazarus, come forth!*" Just moments before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead also in John chapter eleven is the most powerful and shortest verse in the Bible: it simply says "*Jesus wept.*" I want to suggest to you this morning that Jesus did not cry because His friend died; He had no need to cry because He knew that in just moments He would raise Lazarus from the dead. And so He reminded this woman "*Don't cry!*" Why did Jesus cry? It was because He had the compassion and sympathy of God Himself, feeling for those in mourning; for those who were missing this young boy or Lazarus.

Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk to those around him! And Jesus gave him back to his mother! Imagine the surprise of the crowd made up of Jesus' followers, the mourners, the mother, especially those carrying the coffin? Suddenly, right before their eyes, the boy who had been dead sat up and spoke. What he said is not told to us, but the important thing is that "*Jesus gave him back to his mother.*" I kept thinking forward in time to when Jesus was crucified and taken from the cross and that powerful image of the "Pieta" – of Jesus lying in His mother's arms. Jesus was given back to His mother – His lifeless body was in her arms. What a precious, compassionate gift Jesus gave that day. He did what no human being could have done. These words are almost identical to those in our first reading today from 1 Kings 17:23 when the Elijah brought the widow's only son back to life. It says: "*He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"*"

The people who witnessed what Jesus did that day were all filled with awe and praised God. "*A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people."* Compare this to the words of the widow whose only son Elijah asked God to raise from the dead. She said "*Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth*" (1 Kings 17:24). The people were absolutely correct in thinking that Jesus was a prophet, but He is so much more – He is God Himself, in the flesh! That they recognized that *God has come to help his people* probably does not mean that they recognized Jesus as the Son of God, but instead, they used an Old Testament expression that often denoted God's blessing.

Luke tells us at the end of this Gospel reading "*This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.*" The message of Jesus' amazing works and compassion was getting out – to other areas other than the Galilee. Remember Nain is in the region of Galilee, so the word "*Judea*" is used here to show that word of Jesus was spreading through the entire "land of the Jews." Word about Jesus went all over the country and even beyond.

Sometimes we find ourselves mourning or weeping, even with a feeling of despair and not knowing where to turn. My friends, I want to invite you, to imagine this scene again; but this time, instead of it being a funeral procession in a small first-century Galilean town, make it the moment you most dread in this coming week or even next year. Maybe it's something that you know is going to happen, like a traumatic move of house or job. Maybe it's something you are

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always afraid of, a sudden accident or illness, a tragedy or scandal. This has to be for you to do alone in prayer.

As you come into the middle of this scene, if you can, in prayer; feel its sorrow and frustration, its bitterness and anger, its anxiety. Then watch as Jesus comes to join you right in the middle of it. Take some time in prayer and let Him approach, to speak, touch, and command. He may not say what you expect. He may not do what you want. But if His presence comes to be with you there - that is what you most need. Once Jesus is in the middle of it all with you, you will be able to come through it. This will be Jesus giving you the inner healing and strength that you need to deal with this – and to move forward with Him.

Jesus of Nazareth loves you so much that He wants each one of us to be renewed and to be reborn in Him. His compassion and mercy can free you from pain, anxiety, despair, stress, and anything else that you will give to Him. Submit – as if you are taking a test paper or assignment and turning it in – filled with your needs and wants or fears and giving them to Jesus. *“Jesus cares about people's deepest needs – and He loves to heal His people!”*