

## Power Over Death<sup>1</sup>

We can learn much about the message of a passage from the Bible by paying close attention to how it is written—what does the author—in this case, Luke—draw our eye to and what does he fly over with barely a glance

I notice that the gospel writer, Luke, quietly emphasizes that a great crowd accompanied Jesus and a large funeral crowd followed the widow and her son's dead body. Two crowds. Lots of people come together at the city gate of the village Nain where this miracle takes place. The two crowds come together just as the funeral procession is exiting the town through the gate. I have this mental image of the gate creating a kind of inconvenience. The crowds can hardly avoid each other as everyone squeezes through the gate. We understand this. We drive along and a funeral procession is moving through an intersection. Respectively, we stop. All traffic halts. Lots of cars. Maybe we note the size of the entourage. Wow, a hundred cars pass. The light changes three times during the time for them to drag sadly through. Well, something like this is happening at the gate to Nain.

Luke notes further that the man was the only son of his widowed mother. Luke is painting the picture of a tragic

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on June 6, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA. More information about First Presbyterian and other sermons may be found at [www.fpclagrange.org](http://www.fpclagrange.org)

situation. For a widow to lose her only son—her closest male relative—is likely to leave her not only grief-stricken, but impoverished in an ancient near eastern culture that makes attachment to men an economic lifeline for all women and girls. This is probably why there is such a large crowd following her. Her friends and neighbors recognize a truly tragic situation and they show up for the funeral. I think we understand this neighborly compassion despite the hundreds of years that separate us from this situation.

There's some subtlety here as well. The early Jewish readers of this story will recognize how similar it is to a healing performed by the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Elijah, in a city just a couple of miles away from Nain had revived the unconscious, possibly dead, son of a widow. This is probably why Luke goes to the trouble to name the town, but doesn't bother to provide the names of the widow or her deceased son. Anyway in the earlier story, Elijah had to exert a lot more energy, crying out to God and throwing himself on the young man, but he did manage to revive the boy and give him back to his mother.

Jesus makes it look much easier. He approaches the bier on which the coffin was placed and took hold of it. Then by

speaking the command to rise, Jesus was able to bring the young man back to life.

We assume that Jesus' intervention has allowed an awestruck grieving mother to be reunited with her son. But Luke tells us nothing about the revived man. The story flows to the response of the crowd. We have one big crowd now consisting of funeral attendees and followers of Jesus alike. And, not surprisingly, they are spooked. Yes they thank God to be sure. But I understand that they were entirely unprepared for the young man to be alive and they feel alarmed at something happening in their sight that simply doesn't happen in life as they'd gotten used to it. The dead don't sit up. Bodies wrapped in the white funeral cloths don't move around. It's wonderful and it's alarming.

No one in this scene appears quite sure what has just happened. People seem to know that it is, as we'd say, "huge." People seem to know that God has something to do with it. People seem to know that Jesus is very special and they call him a prophet like Elijah who raised the dead. And there was a lot of talk about what happened at the city gate of Nain. So the episode closes with a lot of open questions. There isn't a tidy devotional lesson. There isn't a warning that we need to adjust our behavior. It's just "huge" and then it's over.

Luke's words carry us forward into the next episode. First, he tells us that the activities of Jesus—such as raising the widow's son—were urgently discussed among the people and in the villages. And curiously enough, Luke moves immediately to inform us that John the Baptist catches wind of what Jesus is up to. We learn something disturbing about John the Baptist. John is confused about Jesus. We would think that John the Baptist, the very one who announced to the world that God was preparing to make a decisive move in the world by sending the Messiah. But now in his retirement, John isn't sure that Jesus was the one that he himself had announced. What John needs to be reminded of is the whole picture of Jesus' activities. Tell John, says Jesus, that the blind have received sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor are encouraged, and even the dead are raised up. The point here is that, taken as a list of activities, what Jesus has done is exactly what the old prophets wrote would happen when the Day of the Lord had dawned. John the Baptist needs this spelled out to him in order for him to be confident in the importance of Jesus.

And now we're getting somewhere for ourselves. Jesus' raising of the widow's son at the Nain town gate, while life changing for the widow and the son, hint to you and me that God has made some kind of decisive move in ushering into this world

a new program; a new possibility, a new authority. And under the new situation, it just might be that the tragedy of death and loss and economic collapse, is not all that final any more. Or to put it baldly, the Kingdom of God had been activated with Jesus' coming and all the old rules were called off.

Let's retell the story as an instance of what happens when God's reign or Kingdom has moved into the neighborhood. We see two crowds of people. One is following a dead body and a weeping mother. What they are thinking is that life is cruel and times were especially unkind to this family. The other crowd is following Jesus. They are fascinated in him because they detect in him something refreshing and life-giving and exciting. The two crowds meet and intermingle and in the midst of the encounter, something wonderful happens that leaves everyone saying, "God has visited his people!"

Maybe, and I'm just letting my imagination run a little bit here, maybe this is what happens when you and I, like the crowd following Jesus go out and mix in with the world. Something wonderful happens. Because the Kingdom of God is still out there and is still getting established.

So, you and I walk out of here today. We are following Jesus. Into the world we go. We run into people faced with the harshness and iron rule of the old age. Take people who are

poor. What are the old rules for the poor? The rich get richer the poor get poorer. The poor always take the hindmost. The poor always get exploited. But wait, maybe if the poor encounter Jesus and his crowd, that's us, maybe that changes. Maybe for once, the poor poor breathe a sign of relief because at long last something good happens even to them. I'll be that really is happening with you who are carrying food to the meals-on-wheels houses, or you who are working with kids at Camp Viola.

Or we as a crowd go out following Jesus as his disciples, We mingle in the world. And long-time old enemies decide to call off the grudge and start freshly. Just when everyone thought that some people would be fighting until the end of time there's apology and forgiveness. That's like the dead sitting up.

Even though the words aren't used in our passage, I believe that ultimately it is about the Kingdom of God. And the kingdom is that wonderful new condition that God is bringing into the world that breaks the grip of all the old categories. The Kingdom means that healing, rather than destruction is a possibility. The kingdom means that there's recovery from our addiction to sin. The Kingdom means that the family of humankind will one day have a glorious, fun, family reunion.

The Kingdom means that the rich and famous, for once, won't be running the show. The kingdom means that violence doesn't always win. It means that the tyranny of the impossible is knocked off its pedestal. It means that maybe the Gulf of Mexico won't die, and maybe peace in the Middle East can happen, and maybe the dead man will rise up at his own funeral.

You and I are people of the Kingdom. It's what Jesus is trying to teach us in a hundred different ways. We live and move and have our being in a world that God is making new, in a world where God walks, and where the old order of sin and death have been unceremoniously unseated. We're part of that.