

“Rise!”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Luke 7:11-17

11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17 This word about him spread through Judea and all the surrounding country.

We continue this morning looking at stories in the Gospel of Luke, our passage today following right after the passage Pastor Chuck spoke on last week, about the Centurion asking Jesus to heal his servant. This week we have another story of healing, but the circumstances are very different. There *is* a man, the only son of his widowed mother. But there is *not* a request for help; there is no proclamation of faith in Jesus' healing abilities. In *this* story, the mother does not ask for Jesus' intervention. *She does not have* faith that leads Jesus to act for her – she knows that as a woman without a man to support her, as was necessary in that culture, she will become destitute. She is without hope. There is no hope, because in *this* story, the son is already dead. His body is being carried on a platform out of town to be buried. Healing is not an option.

Until. The rest of the story. This woman without hope is accompanying her son's body on the journey to the burial place outside of the city's walls. A large crowd is with her, and they move slowly, as she cries and grieves, partly for her lost son, and partly for herself, as she does not know what she will do, how she will live.

Another large crowd comes into view; perhaps they are happy and joyful, or perhaps they are tired and weary from their journey. Either way, they are confident. They are following a leader who has been teaching them great things and performing miracles. They have given up everything to follow him, and it is *worth it*.

These two crowds meet at the gate of the town. The leader of the second crowd, a man named Jesus, sees the funeral procession, and sees the woman next to the body. She

has no male next to her taking leadership for her family. She has no family. Tears are running down her face at the impoverished reality that she now faces. And this newcomer, this man who people are following just because, has compassion for her. He stops, and as the funeral procession is still moving, he says “Do not weep.” He comes forward and touches the carrying platform, and *now* the bearers stop and stand still. What is this man doing? But before they have a chance to try to push him away, he speaks *to the dead man*. “Young man, I say to you, rise!” A laugh probably started to form on the on-lookers’ lips; maybe a desperate look of hope began to form on the widow’s face. And then the dead man *sits up*!! He begins to *speak*!! More tears pour from the widow’s eyes, but now they are tears of absolute joy. The miracle worker, this man called Jesus, helps the son from the platform, and directs him to his mother.

Who do you relate to the most in this story? Are you the widow, without hope, sure that there are no options left? Are you the son, so separated from life that you might even feel dead? Are you the on-lookers, perhaps accompanying the widow, helping in the only way that you can, by walking with her in her despair? Or, are you in the position of Jesus? Seeing despair and having compassion, opening up new possibilities to a hopeless situation?

Each of us has been in all of those positions at some point or another. In need of compassion, or feeling dead, or watching as a spectator, or even giving hope to someone who had none.

This is one of those stories in which an impossible deed is suddenly made possible. It is one of those stories that makes us question its truth. There are two other stories in the gospels in which Jesus raises a person from the dead. Jesus brings back to life his friend Lazarus, who was already in his tomb, as well as a young girl who had just recently died of an illness. Are these resurrections possible?, we might ask.

When we ask this kind of question, we are being realistic. When was the last time you saw someone who had been dead multiple days raised to life again? We cannot expect this kind of resurrection of loved ones in our own lives, no matter how much we might desire it, no matter how much faith we have.

So how do we put *ourselves* into this story today?

When I first read this story, I have to confess that I didn't see much hope in it for an ordinary person today. After all, divine intervention, a lucky encounter, saved this widow and her son's lives. How in the world could that happen for us? Jesus is not walking around raising people from the dead.

But, then I was challenged to look at this story from another perspective, and new possibilities began to arise. We can indeed find hope in this story.

There is plenty of "realism" in our world today. There are plenty of examples in which the facts show that nothing else can be done; there are only lose-lose options. Situations in which the damage has been done and it seems like the only thing left to do is to bury the dead, without hope for a good life afterwards, as the widow must have felt. There are plenty of hard decisions to be made based on even harder facts. War-torn countries for which there are no good solutions. Limited finances with which a government or a family cannot meet *all* needs. Churches that are facing fewer participants and finding that they cannot do ministry in the way that they have been used to doing it. Disaster that tears up communities. Diagnosis of sickness; sudden tragedy that changes lives forever.

These things are real, very very real. As real as a son, the only provider for his mother, dying, being carried to burial, accompanied by a mother who will be destitute without him.

And yet.

Jesus still comes to us. Jesus creates for us a *new* reality. Another pastor writes: "Today's passages assert that faith opens us to new dimensions of reality...Willingness to trust God despite appearances opens us to new possibilities, new energies, and a great sense of vocation. This is not denial of the harsh realities of life – economic shortfalls, conflict, mortality – but the recognition that *these realities are not the whole story*. Within the concreteness and limitations of life, unexpected possibilities may emerge. God's gentle providence brings forth possibilities where we only see limitations." (Bruce Epperly)

My favorite verse is Romans 8:28: “God works for the good of all those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This verse tells me that God *can* and *does* make good out of *everything*.

Jesus may not meet us at the graveside, stepping in at the last minute to reverse those too-real facts and make a horrible thing untrue. But, Jesus tells us good news anyway. Jesus calls us in the same way that he called the widow’s son to Rise.

The dead may not rise, but dying spirits may be revitalized. Our prayers and our actions may not have the dramatic responses that we read about here, but they surely make a difference. *We* are partners with God in the everyday healings that may be more life-and-world-transforming with every single time they are practiced, with every second and year that goes by.

Church, resurrections are everywhere. I’m not going to tell you to *do* anything today. Of course I think that there are things that you *could* do, and even *should* do. But sometimes I think that by doing things, or telling ourselves to do something, we start to think that we are taking control. That it, whatever *it* is, is up to us.

I have to be honest, sometimes I don’t trust God to get the job done. I think that *I’ve* got to do it. Today, God is teaching me about trust.

There is pain in the world, despair that is so so overwhelmingly evident sometimes. And you know what? God doesn’t always respond to it with “Do.” Sometimes, God responds with the word, the command, “Trust.”

Trust. Be kind to yourself, because you can’t do everything. Trust, and start there. Start there, and more will come. *Compassion* will come. But when God says “Rise,” God does not make you do it on your own. I know that because I have seen it time and time again. I have seen *resurrection* time and time again.

There are things that hold you back. Things that press you down. Things that make you feel dead.

And God says Rise. God says, Be Lifted!! God says trust.

Resurrection might only show itself literally 4 times in the gospels, but it is everywhere in these stories. It is in the healings. It is in the teachings. It is in the thief who is promised the *kingdom of God* while he is next to Jesus on a cross. It is in the Prodigal Son being welcomed back into his family's home. It is in the words of the law – love God and love your neighbor. It is in the invitations to the disciples to follow Jesus.

Resurrection is everywhere in *our world*, too. It is in the rebuilding of this community after the Waldo Canyon Fire a year ago. It is in a hospital that gives countless patients the opportunity of continued life. It is in a *song* that lifts up spirits and repairs souls. It is in the growth of new flowers. It is *even in death*. Resurrection is there. I have seen it. God has to keep reminding me, but I have seen it.

So read this story. And let God remind you of the resurrection around you. Let God lift you. Trust God to give *God's resurrection* to this crazy world around us.

God says *Rise*. Trust, and the rest will come. The rest will come.

I'm going to end a little differently today. On Friday night I was blessed to attend a Community Sing at First Congregational Church, led by Vocal Activist, as she calls herself, Melanie DeMore. The theme of the event was "Lifted by Song." Melanie ended it with one of her own songs, telling us to feel the melody moving us, calling us. She invited us to *rise* as we sang, to rise when we felt led. And so I invite you to do the same this morning. Sing, and let the melody move within you. You will know when it feels right to rise. This song is called Standing Stone.

I will be your standing stone. I will stand by you.