

“I Say to You, Arise”

*Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still.
And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise” (Luke 7:14).*

When I was ten years old, my grandpa died. His death was very sudden and completely unexpected. The night before he died, my brothers and I had been playing at his house. The next morning he was gone.

It was my first experience with death, and I can vividly remember the raw emotions in the days that followed as my family gathered and grieved together, but one of the memories that stands out above the rest was the experience of going to the funeral home for the viewing. My parents prepared me for this as well as they could have. I knew that many people would come to pay their respects, and that their presence at the funeral home would bring comfort to my family, but even with this knowledge I was terrified to see my grandpa’s body. I knew that this was a bad thing and I simply did not want to face death.

When we walked into the funeral home, I wanted to turn and run away. I stood in the back of the room for a long time before my uncle finally put his arm around me and walked me up to the open casket. Even then I was reluctant to get too close and I wasn’t about to touch the coffin in which my grandfather’s body lay.

I’m sure that my experience as boy colors my understanding of today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, but when I read this text, the thing that jumps off the page is what Jesus does in the face of death. A man had died. His mother was a widow, and he was her only son, which meant that not only was this grieving mother faced with the pain of losing a child, but without a husband, the future for this woman was lost as well. With no husband or son to provide for this woman, she would be relegated to a beggar’s existence, and, when Jesus saw this scene unfolding before Him, Luke tells us that Jesus had “compassion on her.” This is a wonderful word in the original Greek that indicates that Jesus was deeply moved and, taken literally, that His insides were turned out in empathy for this grieving mother. But then, after speaking a brief word of comfort to the woman, Jesus does something unthinkable...He stops the funeral procession. Now, you’ve got to understand, this just doesn’t happen. Even today, in our modern age, the lead car in a funeral procession is fitted with a flashing red light, and traffic comes to a halt as the mourners follow the hearse to the cemetery. But the solemn nature of this funeral procession doesn’t appear to matter to Jesus, and, in a complete break with decorum, He steps up to the bier (which is another word for the platform used to transport the body) and without any hesitation He touches the sacred table which held the boy’s lifeless corpse.

Aside from my own anxious memories, this action would have been completely inappropriate. Not only would this have interrupted the somber procession, but contact with a dead body, or even with the bier on which it was placed, would have rendered you ceremonially “unclean” and in the Jewish world this was a big deal. In Numbers 5, God told Moses: “Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp... everyone who is unclean through contact with

the dead” (Numbers 5:2). This was God’s Word and it was very serious! To be “put out the camp” was to be removed from the community, to be banned from worship, and, until purification for this sin was made through a sacrifice by the priest, this unclean person was unable to receive the assurance of God’s mercy. And in full view of the crowd that accompanied the dead man, *and* the group that followed Jesus and His disciples from Capernaum, Jesus touched the bier!

Compassionate or not, this shocking gesture in the face of a grieving mother and her dead son would have shown disrespect for the mourners, it would have been an affront to the religious tradition of the community, and it would have called for an immediate rebuke. But before any action could be taken to stop Him, Jesus spoke...and what He said changed everything: “‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ And,” Luke tells us, “the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother” (Luke 7:14-15).

My friends, in this amazing story from Luke’s Gospel we are shown exactly who Jesus is, and exactly why Jesus came, and exactly what this means for us! You see, when Jesus speaks...God speaks! And when Jesus comes face to face with death, He doesn’t walk away, or even keep a respectable distance, Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father and God Himself in the flesh, confronts death head on. He reaches out His hand, and He touches the bier! And, in this act – for us – Jesus Christ, our brother in the flesh, true God and true man, embraces the reality of death and all of the uncleanness and separation and sadness that death brings and He speaks another word: “Arise!”

My friends, this is a word of resurrection! This is a word of life! And this Word of God, spoken into the ear of a dead man, is the very word of life that was spoken to us in our baptism, and this word of life is the very word we will hear on the last day when our Redeemer and our Judge calls us out of the grave to join Him in our eternal home. This is the promise Paul points to when he writes, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For 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 6:3-5).

In the ultimate act of compassion, Jesus Christ, our brother in the flesh, true God and true man, went where we would never go and He did what we could never do! He took our sin in His body and He went to the Cross and there He experienced a death He didn’t deserve and there, in His dead body, the sin that has made us unclean, the sin that has separated us from God and divided from each other, that sin was punished forever and, because of this justifying act, we are clean in God’s eyes! We are righteous in God’s presence! And we are accepted into God’s kingdom!

And now, my brothers and sisters, the only word that God has left for us is this: “Arise!” And because of Christ, who is for us in every way...we will. Go with the peace of this promise that God has made to you today. Amen.

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