

Luke 7:11-17
Third Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon Series: Stretch Marks
When I Face Death

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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¹¹ Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people both now and forevermore.

A beautiful, grassy plain swayed gently in the breeze. The quiet serenity was broken, however, by the sound of frantic hoofbeats. Faramir, Captain of Gondor, set out onto the field of Pelennor. Defeated in their attempt to hold the once proud city of Osgiliath, he and his men now made their retreat across the plain back to the fortified city of Minas Tirith. If you aren't familiar with the Lord of the Rings films—even if you are, but you don't recall the scene so clearly—allow me to paint the picture for you. As Faramir and his men rode across that plain there was but one thought in their minds: death. They had just witnessed their brothers-at-arms butchered by the army of Mordor, a force comprised not of men but of the vilest, most evil creatures of that world. Now, as they set out from that scene of death, they were not alone, the army of death continued to press in on them from all sides. As Faramir looked at the white city, fifty miles off, across the wide, expansive plain it must have seemed a hopelessly insurmountable distance.

If the long march wasn't daunting enough in itself, the Nazgul—wraiths born in an age past—swooped in on fell beasts that ravaged his troops with their razor-sharp teeth and massive talons. Death was inescapable... terror and grief all-encompassing... any fragment of hope he once had held dashed to pieces in the field like the men who rode beside him.

A new scene breaks. Galloping full speed across the field, directly toward the encumbered party, a white rider on a white steed. He reaches out and a dazzling light emanates from his staff, a clear high melody sounds through the gloom, the forces of evil overwhelming Faramir are repelled and driven away. As the helpless captain and his fellow survivors continue wearily toward the city, Gandalf wheels around and speeds to their side comforting them with his presence as they ride through the gates to safety.

Our Gospel lesson this morning may not at first glance seem so tremendously epic, we but if we take the time to pull back the veil and see what really is taking place, it becomes clear that what we have here is a scene more glorious than anything Tolkien depicts in his saga. What's more, the story Luke recounts for us is history, not fiction. It was a spring day in Galilee, perhaps not unlike the one King

Solomon once painted for us, **Look, my darling, the winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth, and the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit, and the blossoming vines spread their fragrance** (Song 2:10-14).

The beauty of spring was lost, however, on the throng pouring out from the gates of Nain. Flowers and fragrance served that day not to bring cheer and happiness, but to bring what limited sense of beauty and dignity they could, to the pall of the young man being borne out of the city. As the funeral procession made its way through the streets, it was customary for those whom it passed to fall in behind, so by the time the town gates came into view, a large crowd trailed behind the bier. The wails and chants of women rose up into the air and mixed with the mournful tune of flutes and the melancholy tinkle of cymbals as one, lone, lonely figure led them all to the tomb. In front of the funeral bier walked the widowed mother of the young man who had died. She isn't fleeing an army of orcs. There are no winged serpents swooping around her. But what evils were tormenting her as she walked the path to her son's tomb? Pull back the veil that hides the spiritual forces of evil from our eyes, and what would you have seen that day? Were there demons stalking her? Was Satan himself cleaving to her side, attempting to draw her into impending gloom? The body behind her was that of her son, her only treasure, her sole hope and earthly stay. His light had gone out and now as she looked out across the remaining years of her life, might it not have seemed to be a hopelessly daunting and insurmountable journey? What lies was Satan whispering into her ears? What questions was sinful pride hatching in her mind? Is God really with me? He does not care, can not care, can He? If He did, how could this possibly be happening to me? If He is real, on the other hand, and He is involved in all that's happened to me, then what is it—for it must be something—that I have done to anger Him that He would take my son away? Does God hate me? Who will look after me and comfort me now? Can I, will I, survive this? Death is inescapable, isn't it?

But then a new scene breaks. As this woman and her entourage of mourners pass through the gates, they're met by another host of people approaching the city. This new crowd is led by a man whom Luke identifies for us as "the Lord." And when Jesus, the Lord of Life, came face to face with this procession of death and saw this woman in her grief, we're told that His heart sank. We're more familiar perhaps with His reaction at Lazarus' tomb when He Himself wept. In either case, one thing is clear, Jesus our Lord, is deeply troubled by death. It distresses Him when those whom He loves die. It saddens Him when those He loves are distressed by the death of others. Death, in fact, pains our Lord so deeply that He had come into this world with the express intent of defeating and doing away with it. Here was an opportunity for Him to demonstrate that to the crowds following Himself and this grieving woman and her son.

In order to make this demonstration, Jesus did some rather unconventional things. To begin with, He did not move aside to allow the funeral procession to pass. He and those following Him did not fall in line and travel with the mourners to the tomb. No, in sharp contrast to those cultural expectations, Jesus met the procession head on. He approached the woman and addressed her. **Stop crying**, He said (not exactly the typical words of sympathy one expects to hear at a funeral but warranted by that which He was about to do). He went over to the funeral bier on which they were carrying the young man's body. He reached out and touched it—once again with no concern for the conventions of His day, which said that contact with a corpse made you spiritually unclean. Clearly, there was nothing that was going to stop Jesus from doing what He was about to do. Those who were carrying the body stopped, waiting in anticipation to see what would happen next. As He extended his arm, there was no sudden flash of light, no thunder crash from heaven, His power and might were

hidden in the human form He had assumed and in the simple words He spoke: **Young man, to you I say, get up.**

It may not have seemed that powerful, but when Jesus spoke, His light, the light of life, pierced through the darkness of sin's grip and death itself was sent hurtling away. Whatever power the tempter had had in his whispers to the woman were foiled by the grace and compassion of Jesus. **The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.** When she was faced with death—grappling with the terrible consequence of sin and its implications for her—the Prince of Life came to sooth and comfort her with a powerful testimony that when faced with death we need not fear. Death has no sting, the grave no victory, rather it is to us that the triumph belongs when the light of Christ shines into our lives.

Having seen the miracle, those present were filled with awe and cried out with words which were truer even than most of them knew: **God has come to help His people!**

There is nothing less miraculous about your own story. When you face death, whether it's that of a loved one, or even someday your own, think of this day when death and life crossed paths on the road outside of Nain. When you grieve, know that the Lord grieves with you. Know that his heart goes out to you. Know that He has felt the same. And know what He has done about it. He came into this world taking on human flesh so that He could offer His life in death to atone for the sins of the world. He died; He was buried; and then He rose again. Because Jesus stands triumphant over death, death has lost its grip on you and me.

The light of this truth repels Satan and his whispered lies. It shines through the gloom of our sinful doubts and protests and points us back to the promises of heaven. It calms our fears and soothes our sorrows with the knowledge that all who live by believing in Jesus—who is the Resurrection and the Life—will never die. It assures us the cry of the crowds that day is true. **God has come to help His people.** He came to help you, by taking away your sins. He continues coming to you to help you in times of grief and mourning. He will come again to help on the Last Day. Though you and I should join our loved ones who have gone on before us to the grave, He will come again, this time with all His majesty revealed and to us and to all who sleep in His name, He'll say, **Young man, young woman, to you I say, "Get up!"**

Amen.