



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

---

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**June 5, 2016**

---

## **“A Great Miracle in a Little Town”**

*(Luke 7:13-15)*

Rev. David K. Groth

“And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother” (Luke 7:13-15).

**COLLECT:** O Lord, Father of all mercy and God of all comfort, You always go before and follow after us. Grant that we may rejoice in Your gracious presence and continually be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

---

Nothing much ever happened in Nain . . . at least looking in from the outside. This is the only time Nain is ever mentioned in the Bible. Yet today Nain is just a sleepy little village located up a steep hill, six miles southeast of Nazareth. But I suspect life on the inside of Nain could be far more interesting. These people knew one another, the good, the bad and the ugly. Surely the village had its share of share of characters, its share of scandals, successes, spectacular failures, and rumors of romance and love. Surely there were life-long friendships of 50, 60 plus years, but also small, simmering feuds that endured just as long. There were also events that brought everyone together. When there was a wedding, they celebrated together. When there was a birth, they congratulated the parents. And when there was a death, particularly a tragic death, such as the son of this widow, everything stopped: the planting and the washing, the resenting and the wooing, it all stopped to make way for the grieving.

Jewish law prohibited corpses from remaining within a village or city overnight. They had to be buried on the same day they died, somewhere outside the village. So, when someone died, there was work to be done! The corpse had to be washed, anointed with spices and oils and wrapped in linen. A tomb and stone had to be made ready. Meanwhile, by word of mouth, people learned of the death, and they dropped whatever it was they were doing and made their way to the grieving household. Even a small village can put up impressive numbers for a tragic funeral. Indeed, Luke notices this crowd was “considerable.” The corpse was placed on a bier, a sort of stretcher made of parallel poles with woven cane in between. Then it was time to process

out of the village to the place of burial. In Nain, there are tombs cut into the rock about a half mile west of the village.

The mother would have been leading the procession. We don't know much about her. We do know some time ago, she was at the head of another funeral procession, the one in which her husband was being carried out on the bier. Surely her son was at her side that day, walking with her, perhaps propping her up at the hardest moments. Now he, the son, is wrapped up with linen and on the bier. She can hardly believe it. She is surrounded by a considerable crowd, and yet utterly alone.

There is sadness enough when we bury our parents. But when the reverse happens, when parents have to bury a child, the grief is unspeakable. For this woman, it gets worse. In that culture at that time, with the death of her only son, the woman's final source of support is gone. Women typically couldn't earn any wages, and there was no social security in those days. With her son's death, she has just become a beggar. She's probably not thinking or caring about that just yet, but those people in the procession behind her, they are surely thinking about it. They're going to have to step up to the plate now. They are her social security. If they don't take care of her, who will?

But you know how it goes. At the end of the day all those well wishers and neighbors and friends . . . they will all go home and reengage with their lives. They will start planting again and washing, bickering and wooing. Life will go on for them. And this widow will be okay for a time. In fact, while their compassion is fresh, she'll be overrun with food and visitors. But all that will gradually taper. She'll be weaned. With time, there won't be too many people checking in on her anymore. With time, she might find herself eating things she never thought she would. Spoiled fruit discarded by her neighbors. The grain left behind by harvesters. That's the way it was back then, and it's one of the reasons the Bible insists: "Take care of the widows and orphans." Apparently it's repeated so often because so often it didn't happen. They were neglected and forgotten.

So this considerable crowd is processing out of town, and just at that moment, another crowd is coming into town. It's a rabbi with his disciples and, Luke says, "a great crowd" travelling with them. Nain was certainly not the goal. It just happened to be in the way. So, imagine, just outside of little Nain, two great crowds meet. It was probably the first and last time that ever happened in Nain. The one being led by this poor widow, the other by a man named Jesus. Luke writes, "And when he saw her he had compassion on her."

Stay with me now; we're going to just take a little detour. One of the big schools of philosophy at the time was called stoicism. And one of the things stoics believed was that God was incapable of feeling anything, such as sadness or anger or joy. Now, they didn't just pull this out of thin air. It's actually quite reasonable. Think about it. If you can make another person sad and sorry, or glad and joyful, it means that, at least for the moment, you have some power over him. At least for a moment, you are superior to that person because you're exercising some control over his feelings. Now, no one can be greater than God, right? No one can control God. No one has power and authority over God. If that's true, then it follows that God is incapable of being moved, of feeling anything, of being influenced by our triumphs or tragedies. God is incapable of sadness or anger or compassion because that would place us in a position of power and control over God. See how reasonable stoicism is?

Back to Nain. When Jesus looks at this widow, and sees she is burying her only son, he is deeply moved. He's never met this woman, or her son, but the text says "He had compassion on her". We've talked about this word compassion before. The Greek word is *splagchnizomai*. No single English word does it justice. Literally, it means his "gut moved." It's a compassion that you feel right here in the stomach, as if your intestines were quivering.

That's what Jesus is feeling, gut wrenching sadness and compassion for this woman. Contrast that with stoicism, which says God cannot be bothered by anything that happens

to us. God doesn't feel anything for us because that would give us some control over him. It's a staggering contrast, isn't it? Stoicism is reasonable, but wrong. Stoics had crafted a god of their own reason and imagination, but had not yet met the true God. This text teaches us God is deeply moved by our circumstances.

“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” Interesting enough, this is the first time Luke calls him Lord in his Gospel. And notice, no one is asking Jesus to do anything. The reason? They didn't think he could. Maybe if he had come a day earlier, the Good Physician could have reversed the illness, but now the guy is dead. His brain has been deprived of oxygen for hours. He's hopelessly dead.

But they underestimate the Lord, don't they? We probably do that too. Maybe that's why our prayers aren't bold or audacious, but rather measly and meek. Maybe that's why we don't pray as often as we should, because we don't think it will change anything. So nobody's asking Jesus to do anything for this woman or her dead son, but his compassion compels him to take the initiative. He says to the widow, “Do not weep.” That must have been odd, this stranger telling her not to weep as she takes her son to the tombs. Then Jesus reaches out and touches the bier. The procession comes to a halt. Then silence. “Young man, I say to you, get up!”

When Jesus speaks like that not even death can resist that Word, that power, that authority. Death must surrender its prey. It has no choice in the matter. So of course the dead man sits up and begins to speak. What he says we don't know; whatever it was it was also irrefutable proof that he was fully alive again. And quote, “Jesus gives him to his mother” sort of like a father handing the bride, his daughter, to the groom. He gives to the woman her son, her support, her protection, her future.

Now according to Numbers 19, by touching the bier, Jesus is officially unclean. He's been defiled or polluted by death. In reality, however, isn't it the other way around?

Death has been defiled by Jesus! Death has been polluted by Jesus . . . polluted with life! He is the Lord of life!

Well, what does this miracle do for us? What does it teach us? First this: among us, sympathy can be faked, right? It's not always genuine. You and I can't always feel the compassion we know would be appropriate, and so we put on a sad face and nod our heads a lot and I'm convinced a few can even squeeze out a tear or two on command. But it's a veneer, it's skin deep. It doesn't make our intestines quiver. Our counterfeit compassion stands out when compared to the Lord's own gut-wrenching *splagchnizomai*. But that's not all bad. His compassion for you runs genuine and deep. It is, after all, his compassion for you that put him on a cross. Any god who was apathetic would never consent to crucifixion for you. But we don't have an apathetic god. We have the One who, as Isaiah wrote, has "borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Is. 53:4). Ps. 103, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion to those who fear him" (v. 13).

Moreover, human compassion is often helpless. I don't know about you but often I feel like my hands are tied. I can't right the wrong. I can't pollute death with life. I'm sometimes at a loss for words. We want to be like God, as did our grandparents Adam and Eve, but we can't say to a corpse, "get up" and expect anything to happen. Jesus, however, has the authority and the love and the compassion to do all that. If God's Word has the authority to create a living planet out of nothing, surely it's no sweat for him to give life again to a corpse. Perhaps the greater miracle is that we have a God who can feel such compassion and love for poor and lowly sinners.

Notice he does this miracle with customary dispatch; in his usual subdued, low-keyed and quiet way. No drama, no showmanship, no tears, no rituals, no mysterious incantations. Just a heart full of compassion, and all the authority of heaven and earth in his words. "Young man, I say to you, get up!" I don't know why but I always hear in those words a little scolding, a little anger, certainly not at

the young man but at death: our enemy, our scourge, the enemy he made his own. The enemy he came to defeat, not just for one or two, but for us all. And he would, this time not with words, but by dying himself.

Finally, at Nain we see the Savior's compassion, but we also see a flash of his power. I can't think of a better combination to have in your corner than that: one who has gut quivering compassion for you because he loves you, and at the same time, all the power and authority in the world. What he did for that widow in Nain, what he did for her son, he will do for you, for me, for us. Jesus is coming. The dead will be raised, and death will be no more. Thanks be to God! Amen.

