

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 coffin, and those carrying it 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. (Luke 7:11-17)

God has Come to Help his People

Are you one of those people who has difficulty asking for help? There are some people who try to do everything themselves and even when they’re floundering, never reach out to someone else. But everybody needs help sometimes. There just aren’t enough hours in the day to do everything that needs to be done. None of us is so good at everything that we can handle every situation. Sometimes, it’s just a matter of being realistic about life. Then there are those situations that are so hard and so tragic that anyone on earth would need help. One of the realities about the work I do is that quite often I find myself talking to people about where their help is really going to come from: God. Whether he chooses to work through doctors and nurses and medicine or whether he reaches down from heaven and does a miracle, he is the source of all the good in our lives. This morning, Luke’s gospel shows us Jesus doing the impossible to tell us, **God has come to help his people.**

I.

That’s what the people said when they saw the miracle Jesus did in this lesson. Now, I think when they said that, they were thinking of the way God worked through Old Testament prophets, rather than making a statement about who Jesus really was. But it was true in a greater sense than they understood yet: Jesus is the true Son of God, so God really had come to this earth to help his people. This miracle showed just how far God’s help would go: **He helps us in our greatest needs.**

Jesus and his disciples went to the village of Nain, which was maybe twenty miles from Capernaum, the city that Jesus used as his home base during his work in the northern part of Israel. As they approached the city gate, they saw a funeral procession coming out. A young man had died. As Luke tells us, he was the only son of his mother and she was a widow. What terrible grief for this poor woman! This son was all that she had left in the world. She must have been devastated. In that time and place, it was even worse than the horrible grief and loss she must have felt: she would’ve been dependent on that son to support her. It’s quite likely that she would be reduced to begging just to survive. Nain was not a large town, so word traveled fast. A large procession of the townspeople joined this poor woman as she made this last, sad journey to bury her son.

But Jesus did something no one expected that day. He told the woman not to cry – which might almost seem cruel, except that he then went and stopped the funeral procession. He reached out and touched the coffin – which was most like a kind of open wicker basket. Everyone could see the dead man’s face. Then Jesus said, **“Young man, I say to you, get up!”** And he obeyed! He sat up and started to talk! At Jesus’ word, he lived again. So Jesus gave him back to his mother. He truly ended her reason for crying.

What does all this teach us? The obvious lesson is that Jesus has power over death. Death is the greatest enemy we face. This past weekend, a member of our congregation died. Over the last year, many of us have lost people we love. And the truth is, every single one of us is on the way to dying. All old age, all sickness, all violence and hurt reach their greatest fulfillment in death. And Jesus beat it. For us, death is final. When we lose someone we love, we know that we’re not going to get to see them again in this world. We’ll want to tell them what happened today, but we can’t. We may have things we wish we had said, but it’s too late. We may long to hold them, to touch them, to be with them again. But once someone dies here, we never get that chance again on this earth.

But Jesus defeated death. Jesus died physically, just like we have to. His soul left his body on the cross and that body was just as dead as any other body ever was. It was buried. But on the third day, Jesus rose. His

soul came back to his body and he lived again. When he died and rose, he freed us from the power of death. When Jesus returns, he will raise all the dead, just like he raised that young man at the city gate of Nain. So this young man is really a picture of what Jesus will do for us. And it won't matter if we've been dead for years or even for centuries. Jesus will raise us and make our bodies new and perfect. We will live with him forever. And between now and then, as St. Paul says, to depart and be with Christ is better by far. When a believer dies – when we die – we go to heaven. Our body dies but our soul lives on. Already then, we are free from all hurt and sorrow and pain.

Jesus came specifically to do all that for us. Our God was born into this world in the stable of Bethlehem so that he could help us in our greatest need. But what about all the rest of our needs? What about sickness and grief and loneliness and broken families and financial disaster? Well, raising that young man from Nain shows that Jesus has power over those other things, too. If he can solve our greatest problem, he can solve all the rest. He has the power. And all our problems come from the same place that death comes from. They all come from sin. We die because we are sinners. And we hurt, we struggle, we fail and we weep because we are sinners. Adam and Eve lived in a perfect world, but we don't. But when Jesus lived, he was sinless in our place. That counts for us. When Jesus died, he paid for all our sins and he erased them all from God's record book. When Jesus rose, he declared that we are holy and righteous in God's sight. He defeated sin, so he defeated death. We will go to heaven and we will rise on the last day because sin is lost. We may even live to see Jesus return and then we won't die at all! Because Jesus defeated sin, he also defeated everything about this life that hurts. So in heaven, God will wipe every tear from our eyes. When we rise, it will be to a new and better life in a new and perfect world where we will be free from all tears and sorrow forever.

But what about right now? What good does all that do for me today? It gives me strength and faith to stand in a world that hurts. It gives me hope that keeps me going down here. And the same love and power that sent Jesus to conquer death and sin are at work in our lives today. Jesus raised that young man outside the gate at Nain in this world. His mother didn't have to wait for the resurrection. Jesus intervened in the here and now and did what she needed most. Every day of our lives, Jesus helps us. He solves real problems. He protects us from real dangers. He blesses us with real joys. And even when our life hurts, he turns it all to our good, if not in this life, then in the life to come.

II.

The amazing thing about it is that he doesn't wait for us to ask for help. Last week, we heard how a Roman centurion asked Jesus for help when his servant was dying and Jesus healed the servant. This week, the situation is very different. First of all, the woman's son was already dead. And she never asked Jesus to help. In her grief she simply followed his body out toward the cemetery. Would there have been prayers later, as she grieved and dealt with the practical realities of life alone? Probably. But even though Jesus was standing right there, she didn't run to him and ask him to raise her son. Yet he did it anyway. **God has come to help his people. He helps us even when we don't ask.**

None of us asked for the gospel to come and give us faith. None of us asked for Jesus to die and take our sins away. He did those things for us before we could ask. And Jesus helps us every single day, even when we forget to ask. Why? Well, Luke tells us that when Jesus saw this poor woman in her grief and loss, his heart went out to her. Jesus had compassion on her when she was in agony. Because he loved her, he did what she needed – what she never would've thought to ask for.

Jesus loves us, too. He has compassion on us in all the hurts and sorrows of our lives. He sees the messes we make of our lives, and his heart goes out to us. He sees the things that we are powerless to stop – the losses of loved ones, the illnesses and crime and whatever else intrudes into our lives – and he comes to us to heal us and to help us pick up the pieces of our broken lives. God never promised that we wouldn't hurt here. In fact, he says the opposite. Our sin and the sins of others make our lives painful. But Jesus gives us the strength of faith that can endure those hurts and sorrows, that can even find comfort and joy in his love while our lives hurt.

And Jesus does intervene in our lives to save us. He protects us from harm and danger. How many times did he make you late this week so that you wouldn't be in an intersection at the same time as a cement truck that would have squashed your car like a bug? You can't know. You and I can't know how many times Jesus quietly moved us out of harm's way. We can't know the hurts and sorrows we avoided. But the close calls give us a hint. A couple of days ago, I was following a truck. I needed to make a left turn and went

around him into the turning lane. He didn't signal or look, but he started to come right into my lane. At the last second, I managed to swerve and avoid getting squashed. God protected me. How many other times could it have happened – to me or to you?

God solves real problems that we face. We pray and we ask for his help and he gives it. But sometimes, he just rescues us, before we think to pray. Now, I don't want to undermine the importance of prayer. In fact, the Bible says that we don't receive all the blessings we could, because we don't ask. Sometimes, God is waiting of us to pray. But he loves us whether we pray or not. His love does not wait for us to do something, to say the right words, to offer the right prayer. God's love is what gives us the faith to pray. More times than we can count, he's right there blessing us, solving our problems, working for our good even without our prayers.

And sometimes, God lets something tragic happen to us so that he can work through that hurt and sorrow. The widow lost her son. She got him back, but she still had to go through the hurt. She learned a lot about Jesus' love through that pain. God uses hurt and disappointment to teach us that he never leaves us or fails us. God uses tragedy and loss to teach us what really matters in our lives. God works in all those things to bring us home to heaven, where we will never hurt again.

He is the best helper we can ever have. Today is good day for us to meditate on that truth. This is our graduation service. Seven eighth graders are now done with their instruction in our school. Alongside all the math and English and history that they've learned, they've had their faith nurtured here day after day. But now, they're moving on. What's going to happen to them? Who is going to help them? The same Jesus who raised this young man from the dead is going to love them and watch over them and use his power to protect them for as long as they live. Today is also the last Sunday when we will have with us two families who've served here alongside us for years. As they go to new fields of labor, who will help them? You know the answer: Jesus. And as we struggle along without them, especially here at Peace and at HVL, where neither position has yet been filled, who will come to our aid? Jesus who loves us. Jesus whose heart goes out to us. Jesus who commanded us to preach the gospel. He will come to us even before we ask with his love and mercy. And he will give us what we need and do what is best for us as we go forward without the workers who have served here so long and so faithfully. In Christ, God has come to help his people. We are that people and his help will never fail us. Amen.