

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

It's a dark and dreary scene as a processional makes its slow walk from the city to the gravesite. It's a scene we all know far too well. Be it a mother or father, a son or daughter, a friend or neighbor, the sting of death is one we have felt. The long parade of cars following a hearse. The somber gathering, the quiet mourning of friends and family as the body of their beloved is transported to its final resting place—the silent procession broken by the sobs and wails of despair and cries of deep emotion. Death has won, death has taken a life. This gloomy parade, this acknowledgement of death and the real effects of its power, has been felt since the fall. It has been felt by every man and woman, every child and teen. No matter what we do, death is right there lurking. It is unavoidable, it is inevitable. Our loved ones will pass away, and those who we are closest to will grow old and die. We are slaves to death, and it is our master. Earthly funerals proclaim this with a willing nod to the power of death, afraid of it, unable to answer or challenge it, quietly accepting the fate of mankind.

Our heart cries out in agony, longing to hear the voice of our loved ones again, longing to see the smile upon their face, longing to simply have one more conversation, one more day. No matter what we tell ourselves, we cannot remove the pain, the despair, and the reality that one day, we too will enter into the dark abyss of death.

It is to this scene that our gospel points us. As Christ comes to the gate of the city of Nain, a familiar sight is leaving. A young man has died and is being carried out of the city of the living and making the journey to the city of the dead, the graveyard outside the city walls. Here he will join the others who have gone before him, deprived of all life and joy, lying cold and still in the grips of death. The only sound heard is the deep wailing of his mother, who should have died long before him, who should have been spared the great pain and sorrow of losing her only son; who now is left to mourn her son, having buried her husband likely in the same place her child now is headed. In her cries, there is no hope; there is only the reality that death has claimed yet another victim, another conscript into the army of the dead.

That is, until Christ shows up. He takes one look upon the widow and he has compassion, he is moved to action out of his deep love. He instructs her, "Do not weep." He does not tell her to stop all mourning; he does not tell her to accept that her son is dead and move on. He tells her not to wail and weep as though this is the end, as if her son is lost forever, as if she does not have any hope that she will see him again. Christ knows full well that death has intruded into creation and laid claim to mankind.

After all that is why Christ is here. That is precisely why Christ took up flesh. The very one who is life itself now stands face to face with death. Life itself is standing as death flaunts its strength. Christ will not stand for it. Christ strides confidently forward, breaking all social etiquette, and halts the most intimate of affairs. Here Life Himself, steps into the life of this woman, into the death of this child, and He places his hand upon the bier, and the whole thing stops. Try as it may to continue its conquering parade, Death is forced to stop as the God of creation simply puts out his hand.

Turning to the boy, he says one phrase, "Young man, I say to you arise," and the child sat up and began to speak. Death has lost its grip on him; death, the mighty foe, who we are powerless against, is powerless in the face of Eternal Life. This simple action of Christ, a few words and an outstretched hand, has the power to stop death itself. Here in this town of Nain, death and life contend. And here this very morning Life contends with Death again for you.

You, my dear Christian, are this child. You are the widow. Death may lay claim to you and to your loved ones. It may flaunt all its power in an attempt to drive you to weep and wail, to despair over its apparent power. But it CANNOT win. It is nothing compared to our Lord; it is nothing compared to the life offered in Christ Jesus. Christ is indeed a great prophet who has arisen among us. God has visited his people and has put an end to death through death. His only Son, Jesus Christ, takes the place of this child; he takes your place in the jaws of death, and death breaks its teeth on him. Upon the cross, Christ puts himself under death; he allows it to do its worst, to claim the very Son of God by the grave.

Death did its worst, and Christ overcame it. All death managed to do with its might is bruise the heel of Christ. Death and life have contended in that combat stupendous, and on Easter morning, death's head was crushed, death and sin were overthrown, and lost all hold upon mankind. It was broken and destroyed by the very Son of God, the true Son who has taken up dwelling with man.

Because you are Christ's, because Christ has had compassion upon you just as he did this widow, you no longer need to fear death. No longer need to weep uncontrollably. Death has no more hold on you. You like this boy will arise, your very body will be resurrected and you will see your loved ones again. Your tears, like those of the widow, will be dried and wiped away by the very hands of God.

So do not weep as those who have no hope. For death is not the end. There is a brighter day coming, Christ has taken your place upon the bier, he has taken the place of your loved ones who died in the faith. The Christian funeral doesn't hand you over to death but commends your body to the Lord, who created, redeemed, and sanctified it, who has laid claim to it by virtue of his blood. We go into death not afraid and wailing, but rejoicing that our Lord, Life itself, has come, and has vanquished our great foe.

Christ has won, Christ is risen, and we too shall rise.

✠ In Jesus' name. Amen. ✠