The place where life and death meet.
Text: Luke 7:11-17 for 6/30/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

¹¹Soon afterward Jesus went on his way to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd were traveling with him. ¹²As he was approaching the town gate, there was a dead man being carried out, the only son of his mother. She was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not cry." ¹⁴He went up to the open coffin, touched it, and the pallbearers stopped. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear gripped all of them, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us" and "God has visited his people!" ¹⁷This was reported about him in all of Judea and in all the surrounding countryside. (EHV)

Many of you have lost loved ones, haven't you? So you know how it feels. He was my friend. We grew up together. We played together, studied together, worshiped together. We would even sit next to each other in the synagogue. We were the best of friends. That's why when his father died it was hard on both of us. As an only child, my friend was now responsible of taking care of his mother. This meant we could not spend much time together anymore.

My friend worked as hard as he could to make sure that he and his mother were taken care of, and that's when it happened. He had gone up on the roof of their house to try and fix a leak. They found him on the ground. They were not sure how long he had been there, but it was clear he was dead: His body was cold. His skin was the color of ashes. Now his mother had no one to care for her.

People speak of the tragedy of death. To me death just seems like an in your face reminder of sin. God said through his prophet, **"The soul who sins is the one who will die"** (Ezekiel 18:20). Well, everyone dies, don't they? So what does that tell you?

My friend's death made me angry and frustrated. My friend had worked so hard at keeping God's law. He did all the right things, yet he died. I just kept wondering how anyone can ever be right with God if they have sin ... if I have sin.

His mother asked me to be one of the men to carry his coffin out to the burial site. The "coffin" was nothing more than a simple stretcher with sides to keep body on it. I knew what that meant to carry that casket: It meant I would be "unclean" because I would be touching something a dead body was lying on. I hated that term, "unclean." And since I would be unclean for 7 days (Numbers 19:11) I would be unable to worship on the upcoming Sabbath. This was just another reminder of my sin.

A large crowd turned out for the funeral procession. The crowd gathered around us as we moved slowly out of the city, my friend's mother weeping as we went. As we passed through the city gate on our way out to the graveyard something rather odd happened. Just as we passed the gate, we met another large group of people coming from the other direction.

Suddenly I heard people saying it was Jesus of Nazareth. Nazareth was only ten miles

from our town of Nain, so I had heard a great deal about Jesus. I had heard of his miracles: Changing water to wine at Cana, healing people, driving out demons. Many people called him a Rabbi or Teacher; some even said he was a great prophet.

I figured that out of respect for the dead Jesus would have his group let us pass by. Instead Jesus walked right up to the funeral procession. In fact he walked right up to my friend's mother. Jesus had a look in his eyes as if he understood her loss and pain. I thought he would offer some words to comfort her in her sadness and express his sympathy at her loss. I couldn't believe what I heard him say. Jesus looked her in the eye and said, "Do not cry"! Do not cry? Some "great prophet" he was. Didn't he know she had every reason to cry! She had nothing left: No family, no support, no one to care for her! She would have to beg for money or worse yet sell herself as slave if she wanted to stay alive. Do not cry? How ridiculous!

Then Jesus did something even more ridiculous, he came up and touched the coffin. Didn't he know this would make him "unclean"? Why would Jesus do such a thing? The strange thing was when he touched the casket it was like something in my brain told me to stop. We all stopped and stood perfectly still. I will never forget what happened next: Jesus said, **"Young man, I say to you, get up!"** (v. 14b). My brain told me it was a waste of words; dead people don't get up. I know what dead is and my friend was definitely dead. But to my shock and amazement my friend sat up and started talking! I was so startled I almost dropped the coffin. My friend was asking what going on. I didn't know whether to be afraid or laugh or cry! My friend was alive! We immediately set the casket down. Jesus took my friend by the hand and brought him to his mother. I had seen for myself that Jesus could do more than just heal, he could give life! On a small dirt road outside of Nain was the place where life and death meet, and life won.

People were afraid to go near my friend at first. No one had ever seen a dead person come back to life before. Yet, soon they were praising God for this wonderful miracle. They said, **"A great prophet has arisen among us" and "God has visited his people!"** (v. 16). Could that be true? Could Jesus be God himself? I remembered that the Prophet Elijah had also raised a child from the dead, but Elijah had cried out to God to have the child's life return. Jesus didn't do that, he just said, "*I* say to you, get up!" (v. 14b). Jesus had power within himself to raise the dead. Could Jesus be the Messiah, the one Isaiah called Immanuel, God with us?

That's when it hit me: For Jesus to have power over death meant he had to have power over sin. Sin causes death, so to remove death someone would have to remove sin. If Jesus could make someone physically alive, could he also make a person spiritually "alive"; could he get rid of a person's sin? That's what I wanted. I wanted my sins to be taken away. I wanted to be right with God. I didn't want to be unclean anymore. I wanted to run up to Jesus and ask him about this, but there were so many people crowding around him I knew it wouldn't be possible. So I turned back to my friend and his mother. They were

slowly walking back into town; hugging and talking. I had so many questions to ask my friend, so I ran up to them and walked with them back home.

The problem was, once I got home, I forgot about Jesus. I didn't mean to forget about Jesus, it was just that, well, you know how it is, life is so busy. There were so many things I needed to get done, so many things I had not taken care of since my friend's death. And now that he was alive, there were so many things I wanted to do with him. I became so wrapped up in the little day-to-day things of my life that I forgot about Jesus. By the time I thought about Jesus again he was gone. I didn't know where he went or what he was doing, so I just stayed in Nain and got back into the routine of my life.

From time to time I would think about Jesus, especially when my friend and I would go up to Jerusalem for the festivals. I would hear people speaking about Jesus and asking if he was the Christ. I heard of how Jesus often taught in the temple, and how he proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom. But I never saw him again.

It was about two years after Jesus had raised my friend from the dead. My friend and I had traveled up to Jerusalem for the Passover. While the Passover feast went as it normally did, something seemed different. I noticed it especially the day after the Passover. There was a horrible darkness that hung over the city, and the feeling that God was terribly angry with someone right there in Jerusalem. I know that probably sounds silly, but the feeling was really hard to get rid of.

Then, near the end of the day, it happened: An earthquake shook the city. As news of the damage from the earthquake spread around the city, so did some other news: The news that Jesus of Nazareth was dead! He had been crucified just outside the city. I couldn't believe my ears! The one who had given life to the dead had lost his life, executed like some common criminal. If the one who could give life was now dead, what hope was there for me or anyone else? If Jesus could not save me from my sins, who could? On hill outside of Jerusalem life and death met, and it appeared that death had won.

I felt so hopeless. I spent the Sabbath day doing nothing but praying to God asking for answers: What can I do about my sin? How can I be right with you, O God? What do I have to do to be saved?

One of the amazing things about God is the way he answers our prayers. I started to get the answer to those prayers the very next day. There was a strange whispering going around Jerusalem, the word that Jesus was alive! Some women had gone to his tomb to anoint his body and he wasn't there. People were saying angels told the women that Jesus had risen from the dead. This news was almost as shocking as the news that Jesus had died. In a garden tomb outside Jerusalem life and death met, and life had won!

But I wanted to be certain of this, and I kept wondering how I could be certain. I kept looking for Jesus, but I never saw him. I left Jerusalem confused and yet encouraged. I had hope, a hope that through Jesus there might be some way to be forgiven of my sins.

My answer would come just a few weeks later when we again went up to Jerusalem

for the feast of Pentecost. My friend and I heard this loud noise like a strong wind blowing. Others heard it too because a big crowd of people gathered to find out what was causing the noise. That's when we heard some of Jesus' followers speaking about how Jesus had risen from the dead and what that meant for people. Jesus' disciples told us how Jesus perfectly kept God's law in our place. Then Jesus sacrificed his perfect life on a cross to pay for the sins of the whole world; he shed his perfect blood to wash away all our sins, all of my sins! And Jesus' resurrection assures us that God the Father accepted Jesus' payment for sins. By trusting in what Jesus did we have forgiveness for our sins. More than that, we can be sure that we will also rise from the dead to live forever.

It finally all made sense to me. If Jesus had the power to raise my friend from the dead, that meant he had power over sin. He used his power to remove sin from this world. Now he uses his power to give life to people. And the life he gives us is his own, perfect life. Trusting in Jesus, his perfect life covers our sinful lives. So, what makes Jesus right with God, through faith now makes every believer right with God. I had never heard more comforting words in all my life. Jesus has done everything perfectly to save me, and all people, from sin and death.

I know one day I am going to die, and even my friend who was raised from the dead, one day his body is going to die too. Yet neither one of us needs to be afraid of death. We don't have to be afraid because at that place where life and death meet in this world, we know exactly what is going to happen. It may look like death wins but trusting in Jesus our souls will be with God in heaven. And when that Last Day comes, Jesus will raise our bodies from the dust of this earth, reunite them with our souls, and we will live forever in the perfect joy of heaven.

Jesus Christ is life, and he gives eternal life to all who believe in him for the forgiveness of their sins. When you reach that point where your life meets death, trust Jesus, because the life he gives always wins out over death. Amen.