

The funeral procession made its way out of Nain, bearing the body of a widow's son to the grave. Besides his weeping mother, we are told the procession is made up of a great crowd. Those entering the town would naturally step aside to make way, much as we routinely see when there is a funeral procession on our own city streets. We saw this particularly as the body of an Omaha Marine was brought home, and as his mortal remains were taken to be buried this past Friday. A hero's welcome, a show of thanks and respect. But it was also a making way for the unstoppable procession of death. To stand in the way of the funeral train of Marine Corporal Page, or of any other person, would not just be a sign of disrespect, but also a futile attempt to undo the basic fact that the person has died.

This is the reality that we'd rather not consider. To acknowledge death is to come face-to-face with our mortality, something we can't really handle. In case you doubt that, just consider the past year and-a-half. To face mortality is to confront the serious nature of our sin, what we each justly merit by our turning away from God's life-giving Word. And we'd rather not hear about that. Even Christians today would prefer to meditate upon something else. We'd rather not sing hymns such as the opening hymn today. It is not because the musical mode, the progression of tones, is no longer in vogue. Rather, because it explicitly preaches a basic truth to us: we surrounded by death, we are all mortal because we are sinners, our sins stir God's wrath, we merit the eternal fiery pit of hell, and the only hope and deliverance we have is God's mercy for us in the shed blood of Jesus, His atoning death in our place.

We are all a part, that great funeral procession out of Nain. First as participants, and eventually as those who will one day be mourned. But this procession meets another great crowd. This crowd follows Jesus, who in Luke's Gospel has just delivered a centurion's servant from sickness at a mere word, not even needing to set eyes upon him. One procession runs into another. What does Jesus do when He encounters death? He does not step aside, does not make way for the unstoppable march of mortality. He walks up, touches the bier, stands as a roadblock, forcing the bearers to stand still, and speaking an order into ears that can no longer hear, Jesus doesn't just delay a burial with unceremonious rudeness, He undoes the need for it. He breaks death's clutches, giving the man back to his mother.

This comes from His tender compassion, the tender outpouring of love from His innermost parts. It is that deepest sense of mercy that we have for others, desiring to come to their greatest aid. It is what we often feel for others when they are overtaken with grief, inconsolable, and our paltry attempts at sympathy fall far short. And so Jesus comes, does what no other can do. He meets death and all its corruption head on, and He has compassion. Seeing this, an end put to death's unstoppable march, the former mourners cry out, "**God has visited His people!**"

Years before, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we hear this very thing prophesied by aged Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: "**Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people...because of the tender compassion of our God, the Dayspring shall dawn upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death**" (Lk 1:68, 78–79). The Lord has come to visit and redeem His people. Out of His tender compassion He gives light and life to those in darkness, the very shadow of death. We pray this very thing when we sing in Advent:

*O come, Thou Dayspring from on high, And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Jesus does this because He Himself will be cast into the gloomy clouds, will enter into the dark shadows of death, will suffer not just temporal death, but all the wrath that is rightly due us. He does not turn aside, does not step out of the way to escape what He need not endure, but stands and faces it square on, letting it consume Him. And He has triumphed over it. He breaks death's chains for others because He has broken them for Himself. He is "**the living one. [Who] died and behold,**" is "**alive forever,**" and He has "**the keys of Death and Hades**" (Rev 1:18).

This Gospel and the truths taught in it have very practical significance for us. It shows us what stands at the heart of the Christian funeral. When we bury a brother or sister in Christ, it is done in the presence and praise of the One who has stopped eternal death in its tracks, who has undone temporal death for the young man of Nain, and for Himself, and who will do so for all humanity on the Last Day.

In the Church we do mourn. In much of Church history the color for funerals, not just the attire of those attending, but the vestments and paraments, were black. I think it's a bit unfortunate that we've lost that. Because unlike the world around us, church can acknowledge the reality of death. It is sad. We do mourn. It is a loss. Even where that term,

“celebration of life,” is used, where the focus is on the person and all the good things they had and did in life, there is still no getting around the fact that that life is gone. Yes, grandma’s Christmas cookies were wonderful and great, and now you’ll never have them again. The Christian faith frees us to say, straight-up, “Death is real, and death stinks.” The way we show that we love those who have died, is that we mourn, we grieve. That is what we see in the widow of Nain, it is what we see in Mary and Martha, in our Lord Himself at the grave of His friend Lazarus.

And yet in midst of mourning, in the very midst of death, at the gaping mouth of the grave, there is life. We call upon the One who will put an end to it all. We cling with all our hope to the One who will break the jaws of death open, raise the bodies of all the dead, and wipe away every tear from our eyes. Our funerals confess that God hasn’t just said those we love who have died were “good” people. Our funeral liturgy, hymns, and Scriptures proclaim that our God has declared them and us righteous, that in spite of their and our sins and failures, in spite of the just sentence of death upon them and us, Jesus has faced and suffered judgment for us. Death is real, but its sting, the real pain and agony, has been removed.

We Christians do not deny death, we mock it. We mock it even as we weep. We sing hymns that proclaim the resurrection of the dead, that reassure us of the promise that the bodies that now sleep in death will live. We stand at the grave and we exchange the Easter greeting, complete with alleluias, even when it’s the middle of Lent. All that is to say, when you give thought to planning your funeral, and you should, consider your plans in light of this Gospel, in light of what we confess as Christians. Have those who gather at the time of your death hear and sing of Christ and His victory that He has won for you, not just in soul, but in your body.

Do not assume that your loved ones know what you want. Write it down. We have printed guides in the Church Office that are very helpful in laying out the various things to consider. Above all, make it clearly known that you are to be buried from the Church. This is where you heard the Word of God preached. This is where you received Christ’s life-giving body and blood. This may have been the very place where you were baptized. You have the right as a member of this congregation, to be buried from the church, with the clear and beautiful proclamation of the Christian faith in the funeral liturgy. That in itself is a confession. The service holds forth what you believe, the faith that saves you from sin, death, and hell.

Christian hope is also confessed in what is done with the body. The body matters; it is part of who you are. This community lined the streets where the body of Corporal Page was processed. It would not do to just think nice thoughts about him. The body matters because it is the creation of God. It is not just our souls that are baptized, joined to Christ, fed and made holy by His body and blood, it is also our bodies. So as in Nain, with Lazarus, with our Lord Himself in His death, we treat the bodies of the Christian dead with reverence and dignity. They are not useless chaff, shells, empty husks, to be thrown away. The bodies of our blessed dead have undergone the sentence of death for sin. There is no need for us to speed up the curse of returning to the dust of the earth. Nor do we need to try to stave it off by trying to make the dead look, well, as though they were not dead.

This does not at all mean that either cremation or embalming are in and of themselves are a denial of the faith or sinful. Many pious Christians have done both. Mostly because first one and increasingly the other has been common, assumed practice. And, I think, because we pastors have been either too afraid or too lazy to talk about this topic. But it is well worth us considering how, in all things, in our death as much as in our life, we can give a clear confession of what we believe: that the body matters, it has been and remains joined to Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit, and though subject to mortality, it will be raised to immortality and incorruption.

So also the bodies of Christians are committed to God’s good acre, in a cemetery, which comes from Latin for “house of sleep.” The Scriptures teach us to see the bodies which we lay in the ground as seeds, things that will be renewed and alive, awakened, restored, and brought back together with their souls to live forever. They are to lie in sleep in a place from which they will be awakened. To scatter remains to the elements is not an option for Christians.

The Lord who gave life at Nain is present at our funerals. He comforts those who mourn with real comfort not platitudes about the circle of life or poems about the wind and the rain. He comforts through His holy Word with hope, with a clear and concrete promise, with Life. And He will turn sadness into joy. He will give rest to us as He has already to those who have gone before us. And He will raise us up on the Last Day. For He is the Resurrection and the Life and whoever believes in Him never dies.