

Words to Face Death  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
Sermon Text: Luke 7:11-17

*Soon afterward He went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a great crowd went with Him. <sup>12</sup>As He drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. <sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup>Then He came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." <sup>15</sup>And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. <sup>16</sup>Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited His people!" <sup>17</sup>And this report about Him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.*

Today I have news about Mabel. And more about Ray and Leila, too. In the last year, I've been delving into my family history. The latest chapter of the quest has to do with my great-grandfather, Ray Miller, who was something of a black sheep of the family. He divorced my great-grandmother, leaving her to raise her two daughters alone with funds she earned from her own sewing work. Ray dropped off the face of the earth. There was some rumor that he had remarried. Did he have any other children? Do I have more cousins out there that I don't know about? I eventually found Ray's obituary in the March 4 edition of the Chicago Tribune, 1959. It reads: *Ray D. Miller, beloved husband of Mabel; dear father of Vera Haas, Member of Metropolitan lodge Services Thursday March 5, 1 p.m. at funeral home, Interment Mount Emblem.* Those are the final words about his life. I'm sorry to say that they say nothing of Jesus, nothing of the church, nothing of faith in Christ. Yes, he was a member of the Masons – but that only represents a kind of a generic faith in a generic God of all religions, not a specific faith in the Savior. I guess I can presume that he at least found friends there.

I also found my grandmother's obituary – that was Ray's daughter. This was really important for me, too, since she died when my mom was a little girl, so I never had a chance to meet Leila. Her final lines from 1942 read: *Leila C. Zirzow, nee Miller, June 20, beloved wife of William, fond mother of Elaine and William, dear daughter of Amanda Miller, and Ray D. Miller, sister of Vera Haas, ... Services Tuesday 2 p.m., North Austin English Evangelical Lutheran Church. Interment Ridgewood.* Here at least we have the church – a sign of faith, a sign of life which goes beyond the grave to life eternal. I had a lot of relatives who died in Chicago. I could have found a lot of obituaries, but I didn't. I guess my family wasn't too excited about getting things in the paper. What I have for so many others – at least as far as obituaries go – is silence, the silence which death brings, no words at all echoing from the life that was lived. That silence from the obituary columns recalls the general silence and awkwardness we often feel in the face of death. Many of us don't even care to go to funerals. We're glad when we can find a reason not to be there. We feel awkward when trying to comfort the grieving. We struggle at what we can say, what we should say. Nothing can steal our words away like death. There's the silence of the final minute, the silence that follows the last breath, and then the silence of the stunned shock that our relationship with this person is really over and now, somehow, we're going to have to go forward without them.

In our Gospel lesson, Luke tells of the encounter between Jesus and a grieving widow who is burying her only son. When Luke presents the graveyard procession, there is an eerie silence about it. He records no noise, no words, although we might rightly imagine that there was the loud weeping and lamentation which was customary for the oriental peoples of the day. They at least had that—the catharsis of wailing in the face of death. Today we're more inclined to try to put death out of sight, out of earshot, and try to keep it out of mind. People die in hospitals or nursing homes, although the hospice movement is working hard to let people die at home, surrounded by family. Many of us are so uncomfortable with the topic, we don't want to talk at all about our end: some of us have no life insurance policies, as if getting a policy invites death and accepts it too much and makes it too real—so that we might have to die. Few of us make any planning for our final arrangements. We don't tell our loved ones what hymns to sing at our funeral, what Bible verses to focus on; we may not have a burial site. If we don't talk about death, don't acknowledge it, won't it just disappear?

In our lesson, we see what words Jesus had to say – and they were fighting words. He stops the bier with a touch and He spoke those mighty words: "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the young man sits up and begins to speak and Jesus gives him back to his mother. This is the power of Jesus. Death came into the world

by sin. It is sin's punishment and wage, but Jesus comes into the world with the forgiveness of sins, forgiveness he would accomplish by His own cross—and by that forgiveness, he gives life. In fact, by His mighty word, on the day He comes again, he will raise up all the dead. He will call all from their graves. Those who have believed in Him will rise to life eternal with God; those who have not repented of their sins and have not come to Him will rise, too, but to their eternal torment. Death will be no final lord. Jesus is the Lord and nothing can separate Him from His beloved people, nothing will stop him from judging the nations, as we will all stand before him. "Arise," He said. That one mighty Word of Jesus to the young man that day let loose a torrent of words that echo to this day. The young man sat up and the silence of death was broken. He began to speak. The crowd marveled and began to say, "A great prophet has arisen among us" and "God has visited His people" – two statements which were more true than they realized. Jesus was indeed going to rise among them, rise from the dead himself. God has truly visited His people – He was there in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus. And then the word about Jesus rippled forth through Judea and the surrounding region. It got into the Scriptures and it's bubbling forth this morning among us, for us to talk about and for us to share – the word of Jesus' victory over death and the immortal life that He gives. This word of Jesus breaks our silence in the face of death. It gives us words to say and words to share. St. Paul even talks to death directly and mocks it: "*Death, where is your victory; O death, where is your sting?*" We stand before the open grave and we recite: "*The Lord is my Shepherd...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*" Death should silence us no more. It has become a first-rate opportunity to open our mouths and witness to the prevailing power of our Lord Jesus and His authority to give life to all who trust in Him.

When a loved one is dying, the words of Jesus can be on our lips. You can promise them the full forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God in His Name. You can assure them that His death has undone death and His rising from the grave seals their victory. For those who mourn, let them know that life in Christ lasts from here to eternity. Those who fall asleep in Christ wake to joy and bliss. And in our thinking about our own death, we Christians can develop a good courage in the face of our earthly end. We don't have to deny it or ignore it or try to wish it away. We know that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ. We know that those who die in Christ do not die but live with the power of His own divine life. Many Christians do take the opportunities that death gives to proclaim the faith. They're kind of like people stepping into a boat to cross a wide lake. Even when that boat has moved out of sight, they send up flares that light the way for those who come after them. Some do indeed help make their final arrangements and make sure that the hymns and the readings reflect their faith in Christ. Others will remember Christian charity in their wills as a final statement of their commitment to the enduring mission of God in this world. Some will have their obituary make clear statements of their faith: "Joe Smith was taken to eternal glory through the grace of His Savior, Jesus Christ...Mary Jones fell asleep in Jesus to await her resurrection day...Bill Baker, baptized into Christ, found the fulfillment of his faith as the angels carried him to His heavenly home." Honestly, we can do better than copy the generic formulas which the funeral homes provide us. And even as we move forward to our own final departure, we do so as those claimed by Christ, as people who belong to the Kingdom of life. Jesus is our Lord over life and death. When the doctors say there is no hope, we still have hope. Jesus is Lord. When someone says that our quality of life means we should cut life short, we answer that the length of our lives belongs to God to determine and not to us. Jesus is Lord.

A few years ago, a 21 year old man, Sam Schmid was critically hurt in a car accident. Doctors pronounced him brain dead. They began to talk to the family about organ donation. They discussed the right time to take him off of life support. Then Schmid began to respond. At the doctor's command, he held up two fingers. On December 23, he came out of the coma. His mom called it a miracle – and the word was getting out. Atheist friends were calling the mom and telling her that they'd be heading back to church. It's a modern day telling of our Gospel story – a young man snatched from death and given back to his mother. This is what Jesus is doing and what He will do – all of us are to be snatched from death. Death has been defeated by the power of His life. This gives us something to talk about, something to say, something to promise, and a reason to praise. Christians, of all people, we ought not be silent before death. The Word of Jesus raises us to life. Amen.