

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

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# HOPE NOT DESPAIR

*Preached by Joshua Ashton Hill, Director of Children's and Youth Ministry  
June 6, 2010 The Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Lesson: Luke 7:11-17*

A Note to the Reader: As a sermon is primarily intended to be heard, not read, this sermon is written not in prose but in the "Aural/Oral" style. As such it seeks to achieve a conversational tone. Traditional "errors" in grammar and punctuation arise from the inscription of an Oral form.

I speak these words in the name of God: Father, Son,  
Holy Spirit.

In today's gospel passage Jesus raises a young man  
from death.

Can you imagine? A dead man sitting up in his coffin.  
Talking?

I used to be afraid this would happen at open casket  
funerals when I was a kid.

It's a natural thing to fear, the dead rising.

When this happened with the young man, we are told  
that fear seized the crowd.

They professed faith in Jesus and called him *a great  
prophet*

But they don't stop there. No. "God has visited his  
people," they say.

*God* has visited his people.

And the word spread.

##

This is not the easiest passage to process. Not for us  
moderns.

In my preparation I sympathized with a modern-era  
scholar who said of this passage,

"It is not easy to preach about this story if one cannot  
accept it."

Likewise, we cannot learn from it if we do not accept  
the reality of the power of God in the resurrection.

It certainly baffles the modern mind, but let me offer a  
gentle caution against attempting to rationalize the  
resurrection element of the story.

Attempting to do so is as Sir Elton John says in his  
1972 hit single 'Honky Cat':

"It's like trying to drink whiskey from a bottle of  
wine."

This story is not about anything but the resurrection.

The triumph of life, love and hope over death, despair  
and suffering.

What we have here is abundant blessing, but it must be  
taken on its own terms.

###

Let's take a closer look at the narrative form and context of the passage.

Jesus has just healed a centurian's servant.

He has done a great thing for a powerful Gentile, a Roman commander.

Now his attention is turned to a disempowered Jew. A woman. A low figure in public life.

And she's a widow. Not only suffering the emotional pain of losing a husband.

But also the economic hardship of losing a provider. She's likely not able to fully support herself.

Which is one of many reasons why it's now acutely tragic that this widow has lost her only son.

Can you imagine this poor woman's sorrow?

It's just too much for her to overcome.

No family, no progeny, no power, no hope, no reason for living.

Her despair is iconic because it captures the depth of sorrow which is addressed by the power of resurrection.

It is precisely in places of darkness where we witness the power and mystery of light, the holy process of fermentation by which

Despair is transformed to hope in Jesus.

Back to our story.

###

The action begins as Jesus and a faithful group of followers are parading together towards the gate of the town.

Then, the plot thickens.

All of a sudden, this parade of celebration and abundant life encounters a *funeral* procession coming out of the gate of the town

What we have here is a collision, a crisis.

A surge of life going-in literally comes nose-to-nose with a surge of death going-out.

A confrontation of themes.

Think about that literary set-up for a second.

A face-off between hope and despair, life and death.

And the climax of this story—the resurrection of the young man--

This climax follows a pattern which is common in Luke's gospel.

It's worth exploring that pattern here a bit.

It looks like this: Jesus sees the suffering, Jesus feels the suffering, Jesus intervenes to end the suffering.

1. Jesus sees—truly sees with eyes that penetrate to the soul—He takes the time to see the suffering victim suffering. Jesus sees a woman so crippled with pain that she cannot go on.
2. He is moved viscerally by divine compassion, the ultimate virtue. Compassion literally means “to feel with,” or in other words to experience the suffering of another as your own. The best translations from the Greek word emphasize that Jesus knew her feeling *in his gut*. For Jesus to feel her despair is to destroy it. I imagine despair on Jesus' heart like a drop of water on a hot pan—It sizzles and just dissipates.
3. Jesus takes action to end the suffering. The Word of God speaks: “Do not cry.” “Young man I say to you rise!”

And the dead man sat up and began to talk.

And the people were terrified. They called him the great prophet.

But Jesus had fulfilled *and exceeded* expectations for the return of Elijah which were popular in that day.

And so they went on to say

*God. God* has visited his people.

And the word spread about Jesus.

There we have it in a tiny nugget of 7 verses.

The whole gospel.

*The Christian message.*

God sees his people suffering the despair of death and alienation.

God feels our condition, viscerally.

God intercedes on our behalf that we might find joy and gladness.

This story illustrates the broader message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

It also gives us a framework for the mission and ministry of the Church.

There is hope for the hopeless, strength for the weary, freedom for the captive.

Yes, God has visited his people in Jesus.

And to believe in his resurrection is to place our faith in the visceral compassion of God.

Who not only sees our suffering. But feels it and conquers it,

That we might be loosed from our bondage to all that holds us back.

And keeps us from new beginnings, from healing, from reconciliation with God and others, from repentance, from wholeness.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the power of God to defeat despair with eternal love and life and hope.

I bet some of us could use something just like that.

Here's the good news:

It is yours if you need it. Just believe.

And the rest of us will spread the word that

The Lord is risen indeed.

Alleluia. Amen.