

Series: The Words of Jesus on Healing

Today: Healing and the Resurrection

Text: Luke 7:11-17

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, April 12, 2009 (Easter Sunday)

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Let me take a few moments to say welcome to those of you who may be visiting with us this morning. We know that Easter Sunday is a day when we see people that we haven't seen before and we may not see again. Some of you are visiting from out of town, and we are grateful that you chose First Presbyterian Church as your worship home for Easter. We hope that you will take our greetings to the church you attend in your community. Some of you are here because it was important to someone else that you are in church today. We know that it may not be important to you, but if there is one Sunday of the 52 Sundays in a year that you might choose to be in church, you have chosen the right one because what we celebrate today is at the heart of the Christian faith: the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead.

Some of you may have been apprehensive about attending church because you do not know who we are or what we believe, and you may have thought that you would meet people who take themselves way too seriously and would judge you harshly. Rest assured, that is not who we are. We are grateful whenever we have visitors in our midst that might hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the very first time or hear it in a way they have never heard it before.

Usually I have a story on Easter from my barber to put people at ease, but Jack let me down this year. He didn't have a story that fit the Easter profile. However, you need not fear. One of our members sent me a poem that may tell you something about the kind of people we are here at this church. It goes like this:

*I was shocked, confused, bewildered
As I entered Heaven's door,*

*Not by the beauty of it all,
Nor the lights or its decor.*

*But it was the folks in Heaven
Who caused me to sputter and gasp--
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,
The addicts and the trash.*

*There stood the kid from seventh grade
Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor
Who never said anything nice.*

*Herb, who I always thought
Was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
Looking incredibly well.*

*I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?
I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
God must've made a mistake.*

*'And why's everyone so quiet,
So somber - give me a clue.'
'Hush, child,' He said, 'they're all in shock.
No one thought they'd be seeing you.'*

So whoever you are and however you decided to be with us this morning, welcome! We are glad you are here, and if you find something here that makes you feel like joining us again, we will be pleased to welcome you back.

This morning we are concluding our series on The Words of Jesus on Healing which is a part of a yearlong series on the Words of Jesus that will continue until September. Our focus this morning is a story which only appears in the Gospel of Luke. Unlike many of the healing stories we have considered during this series which appear in all of the Gospels, this story is unique to Luke. It is the story of a widow whose son has died, and if you can remember to take home three

words with you today, you may be able to use it as a story which will bring healing to your life, as well. Because it is the story of a man who is brought back to life, perhaps the acronym we use for cardiopulmonary resuscitation would be a helpful tool for you to remember them—CPR.

The words are: Compassion, Power, and Restoration.

Compassion

The first thing to notice in this story is the compassion of Jesus. It would have been a painful enough event that a mother has lost her only son, but unless one understands the social environment of first century Palestine, one may miss the significance of what Jesus did for her.

This woman was a widow, and in the first century women were totally dependent on men for their position in life. The role of women was primarily to provide heirs for their husbands. If her husband died, it was the responsibility of the son to care for his mother. If there were no sons, she was vulnerable. She would be forced make her way in life by begging or prostitution. An unmarried woman who was unattached to a man was considered helpless and hopeless.

Our text says that when Jesus saw the woman, *“he had compassion on her.”* In the original language, the passage literally means that he was moved in his gut. It is that feeling we get when we see on our television the ruins of the earthquakes in Italy these last few days or the tornadoes in the Southern part of our country. We can imagine what it might be like to lose everything we have and everyone we loved in an instant. There is emptiness in our gut which identifies with their situation. This is the feeling that Jesus had for the Widow of Nain on the loss of her son.

Rebecca O’Connor had that feeling four years ago when she saw the ravages of the Asian tsunami disaster. She was working the night shift at New York Presbyterian hospital, where she was a pediatric nurse. She felt compelled to “do something.” And she did do something. She

flew to Sri Lanka, along with eight other medical professionals, for a two-week medical-relief trip.

Arriving in Sri Lanka, they traveled through 150 miles of destruction before arriving in a downtown area that had been completely devastated. Setting up their clinic in a downtown Sri Lankan mosque, they saw 40 to 100 patients every shift. Respiratory problems and foot and leg wounds caused by stepping on debris when wading through water were the most common ailments treated.

O'Connor and the others soon discovered they were less than a mile away from a local hospital and another large clinic. She questioned a Sri Lankan friend, "Why are people coming to us?" The friend said, "Because at the hospital someone asks, 'Name? Age? Complaint?'" and then gives them a sheet of paper and tells them to go wait somewhere. You sit them down, ask them what's wrong and treat them. You listen to them."

Rebecca O'Connor summed it up: "It seemed that the most valuable therapy we were providing had nothing to do with antibiotics or wound care. By listening to story after heartbreaking story, admiring pictures of families once happy and healthy, and playing soccer with children who lost everything, we were able to say, 'We care about you, and we share in your grief,' without speaking a word." [Source: *Rebecca O'Connor, "They Needed to Know the World Cared," Newsweek (2-14-05), p. 18*]

Power

Let's turn to the "P" in our acronym: the power of Jesus. All of the healing stories we have considered during this series have demonstrated that Jesus allowed the power of God to flow through him in a way that we rarely see in our time. This one is unusual in that it deals with death and the power of God over death which was given to Jesus.

The text says “*he touched the bier*” and the dead man sat up and began to speak. As one commentary says, “*Jesus claimed as his own what death had seized as its prey.*” (Barclay, DSB, p. 88) He claimed life for a lad who had been marked for death and proved that he is not only the Lord of Life; he is the Lord of death, as well.

A colleague tells the story of a group of Laotian refugees his church had sponsored who asked if they could become members of the church. They had only a rudimentary understanding of the Christian faith, so he suggested they begin with a bible study to make sure they understood what a commitment to Christ and his church entailed. They happily agreed.

In spite of the Laotians lack of Christian knowledge, my colleague says that they were some of the most exciting studies he had ever led. When they came to our story this morning, he asked a more sophisticated question about what this might mean in our lives. He was met with silence. He tried to rephrase the question. Again, more puzzled silence.

Finally, one of the men hesitantly asked, "Do you mean that Jesus actually made this man come back to life?" My colleague thought he was finding the story incredulous, and he didn't want to get distracted with the problem of miracles. So he replied: "Yes, but we should not get hung up on the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can restore the parts of our lives which are dead and help us come to life again.

Another stretch of awkward silence ensued until another replied, "Well, if Jesus raised a man from death, he must be a powerful man!" At this, they all nodded vigorously and chattered excitedly to one another in Lao. Except for my friend, the room was full of wonder. He suddenly realized that they grasped the story better than he did. [Adapted for this sermon from the following source: *Mark Galli, Jesus Mean and Wild (Baker, 2006), p. 112*]

This is the power we celebrate today. It is the power of God over the power of death.

Restoration

However, we must make a distinction between the restoration and resurrection. What Jesus did in this passage was to restore a man to this life. As we discussed in our Early Word bible study this week, this did not mean that he would never die again. Jesus demonstrated the power of God over the power of death, but unfortunately it meant that the man had the dubious distinction of dying twice. Resurrection is something more. It is the power of God to raise those who have died to eternal life which God demonstrated on that first Easter morning. It is the hope we proclaim that all of us will one day be raised, like Jesus, in a new body, a spiritual body, where we will never have to die again.

A few months ago I was in San Diego attending the National Pastor's Convention and visiting my sister's children who live there. My sister died ten years ago, and one of my niece's was remembering her final words just before she died.

Just a few weeks before she died, my sister and I had a conversation which I shall never forget. At the request of my mom, I had called my sister because, in my mom's words, "*She needs you right now.*" When she was given the phone, I told her mom had called and told me that she was having a rough night. I asked her what was bothering her, and she replied, "*I'm scared.*" When I asked her what she was scared of, she replied, "*Dying.*"

We were quiet for a moment, and then I asked her, "*What is it about dying that scares you?*" And she replied, "*That I will be all alone.*" So I said to her, "*So dying means that you will be all alone, forever?*" and she started to cry.

I asked her to think about that with me. Was there anyone she could think of who had died who might be on the other side of this life as we know it? And she began to name some people who might be there: our grandmother, our father, a friend whom she had seen through his death, and there were others. When she was through, I asked her if she felt any better, and she

said she did. Then I told her that I thought there was at least one whom she had missed. She asked me who that was, and I told her, “*What about Jesus?*” And she said, “*Oh, yeah. He promised he would never leave us or forsake us, didn’t he?*” We prayed together, and that was the last conversation I had with my sister before she slipped into a coma.

Now this is where my niece comes in. She asked me if I knew the last words my sister said before she died. I told her that no one had ever told me. My niece said that the last words my sister said were: “*I think I see them coming.*”

Conclusion

My friends, this is the good news we proclaim on Easter. CPR: The compassion of Jesus is never failing. The power of Jesus is overwhelming. The hope we have in Jesus is our resurrection to eternal life. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.