

In the name of Him who gave his life for us, Amen

The Passion Gospel we just read is from the 18th and 19th chapters of John. It is a very powerful story, powerfully told. And it is more than a little humbling to try to preach on this story, told this well. One of the great preachers of the Church said one time that at the Good Friday liturgy, after the Passion is read, a good preacher should lead the congregation in Psalm 22 and then be quiet. I am more than a little tempted to do just that. But bear with me for a few minutes. I would like to tell you about a story that is found in the middle of Luke's Gospel.

This is a story we don't read very often. It is one of the more obscure, lesser known and shorter stories in the Gospels, it involves Jesus and a widow in Nain. This is what Luke tells us:

Luke 7:12-15 As (Jesus) approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

This simple little 97 word story from Luke's Gospel makes a perfect counterpoint to the tale of our Lord's Passion. When Jesus walked into a small town and saw a funeral procession coming through the gates, heading toward the burial site outside town, He looked at the woman, recognized her as a widow who had lost her only child, and He felt

compassion for her. Without a word of introduction and with absolutely no fanfare, Jesus walked up to her and told her son to rise – and he did. And the story ends with the line, “And Jesus gave him to his mother.”

On that afternoon in Jerusalem, the procession was not going to a burial site, but to Golgotha – the place of the skull – and there were no strong friends to carry the body – Jesus himself had to carry the cross. On that afternoon, after He had been beaten and humiliated beyond belief, Jesus was hoisted up on a cross and left to die in agony. No one came and had compassion on His mother, who was also a widow. No one ever had compassion for Him as He hung there, slowly asphyxiating. No one cared deeply for His suffering, or that of His mother as she stood nearby, watching and no doubt crying. No one sought to have them tearfully reunited as a loving family. Instead, everyone walked by and continued to hurl insults at Him, even after He could no longer be expected to hear what they said.

There was no compassion to be found that day in Jerusalem. Except ... for the compassion of the One who hung on the cross. You see, He hung on that cross ... He suffered and He died ... in the ultimate act of compassion. Until His selfless act, we – human beings – you and me – were dead. The human race had completely died, drowned in our own sinfulness. But when He hung up there on the cross, He showed us what compassionate love looked like, and He made a place where all of the sin, death and horror of the world could be laid down.

The widow of Nain experienced the boundless compassion of our Lord, when He gave her son back to her. But we have been given an even bigger gift. We have been given our OWN lives back. After Jesus gave the man back to his mother, the people of Nain laid down the bed that they had carried the widow's son on. Now it is time for us to lay down everything that represents death in our lives.

Come to the foot of the cross of Christ. Bring all of the sins that weigh you down. Bring all of the hurts and the heartaches. Bring all the pettiness and the jealousy, the envy and discord. Bring your worries. Bring your struggles. Bring all of the death that infects your life. Lay it all down and leave it for Jesus. Even as He hangs there in agony, his loving arms are stretched wide, waiting for us.

Amen.