

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

She was distraught. No. She was beyond distraught. In the last days she had gone from sadness to grief to gripped by total despair. It was bad enough when she lost her husband. There had been the horrible grief and loneliness, but at least she had had her son. He had taken her in and cared for her since his father died. They had discussed how bad it was to be a widow in this society. When her husband died, everything he owned passed to his only son, leaving her with no income and no way to create any. She had felt so incredibly unwanted by the people in the town and in the synagogue once she became a widow. She had thanked Yahweh repeatedly for giving her such a wonderful son to care for her in her time of despair and distress. Suddenly, he was gone too. Sure, she was now afraid again and she felt even more isolated by the fact that she was now completely alone, but that gnawing pain in her gut was from the loss of her only son. The pain in her heart was so intense that she was having a hard time functioning. It was a real struggle to put one foot in front of the other. As they headed out the gates of the city, toward the burial place outside of town, she was having trouble keeping up with the men who were carrying her son. The tears in her eyes were so thick that she sometimes lost sight of the – what did the Rabbi call it? Oh yeah, the bier. It looked more like a mat with handles to her. But her tears and pain were so intense that she couldn't even see this thing as she followed out of the City.

The pain was so intense. She remembered vividly the grief she had gone through when her husband died. The feelings of shock, sadness, anger, despair and anguish that just seemed to wash over her in never ending waves, threatening to drown her very soul.

Just when she began to get her head back above these waves, her only son died and now, she knew it would all start again. But somehow she knew that it would be much worse this time and that added fear to the list of emotions she couldn't deal with.

Grief. It is perhaps one of the most raw and visceral of all emotions. And it is universal. Some emotional responses seem to be missing from some people's make-up, but grief happens to everyone. The widow of Nain, whose world we are looking in on this morning, knows all too well that grief can seem at times to be inescapable and overwhelming.

I remember when I was about 11 or 12, my grandfather and my father took me with them one afternoon to go and visit my great grandmother. She was well into her 90's by this time and had recently begun living in a nursing home. She was almost totally blinded by cataracts and degenerative changes in her eyes. She was also almost totally deaf, but her mind was still as razor sharp as it had always been. When we walked into the room and my grandfather told her that the three generations of us were there together, she knew that this was no ordinary visit. She asked, "what's the matter?" My grandfather leaned close to her bed and almost yelled at her, "Mama, I'm sorry, but Mac died yesterday." Mac was her oldest remaining child. She had given birth to 8 children, 7 boys and a girl (as well as a couple that didn't survive the birth process) and she had outlived all except two now. She had lost them at all stages of life, from early childhood, now through one in his seventies.

I remember vividly what she told my grandfather after he broke the news. She said, "No one should ever have to bury their child. It's just not the way it's supposed to be. The child should bury the parent." Then there was a long pause and she said, "I'll

never bury another one. This is the last.” And as she promised, she didn’t bury another. Not only because my grandfather and his younger brother both survived into their 90’s but because she died very shortly thereafter. The death certificate for “Mama,” said “natural causes,” but I know that she died from grief. It’s not that Mac was her favorite, she loved all of her children and they all knew that. No, it’s because Mac had been the one who lived with her when she was alone. He made a home for her, or vice versa, depending upon how you look at it. But their lives together had been intertwined in a very special way. She relied upon Uncle Mac the way the widow of Nain relied upon her only son, and it was the special grief of this loss that finally got to her.

I recently read a book by a Christian Philosopher who lost an adult son to a mountain climbing accident. He published his journal, years later, in hope that it would help some other parent who had lost a child. During the depths of his own grief process, this father wrote in his journal that he was thankful for all of the well-meaning people who tried to help him. But, he said, “the only way I will come out of my grief right now is if my son gets up out of that grave and comes home.”

The widow was struggling through the gates of the city, on the dusty road out of town, trying to see where she was walking, between the teardrops, and then she saw him. He was surrounded by a huge throng of people. They were all talking about the things they had witnessed him doing and saying over recent days. There was something about the teaching he had done on the plain outside Capernaum, how the poor were going to have the Kingdom of God. And she also heard someone saying something about the slave of a Centurion being healed of an illness. The men who were carrying the bier, stopped when they almost ran into him. She looked up at him, through her tears and saw

something in his eyes, kindness, compassion and an amazing love. Then she saw him reach toward the bier and she thought, “Oh no. He is going to defile himself.” But she couldn’t even entertain calling her son a defilement, even in death.

Her heart almost stopped when the Rabbi told her son to get up, and he did. She rushed to him and had to touch him to prove to herself that he was alive. Even then she didn’t believe it. Then, suddenly she was hit with an indescribable mix of emotions. She was badly frightened. Who was this man and where did he get the power to raise someone from the dead? She was elated to have her son back, but she was also worried that maybe he wasn’t really back for good, maybe this was only some temporary trick. Then she heard the crowd start to chant that this man, Jesus was a prophet. Suddenly it made sense to her. He was a prophet, just like Elijah and Elisha. She remembered the stories of the great prophets calling on Yahweh to bring the children of widows back from the dead. Now it made sense to her – Yahweh had indeed looked favorably on her.

Jesus raised the widow’s son from the dead, and Luke wants us to understand that Jesus was the next in a long line of powerful prophets of God. In fact, just to make sure that none of his hearers missed the point, Luke even took a line directly out of 1st Kings and used it in this story. But Luke wants us all to know that there is more to the story than Jesus being the next great prophet. He wants us to know that Jesus is beyond the prophets, that Jesus is the Son of God – God incarnate, who is the worker of miracles. But there is so much more to this story.

Jesus raised the widow’s son for the same reason that Elijah did. For the same reason that Elisah did. For the same reason that he raised the daughter of Jairus. Quite simply, Jesus did these things out of compassion for the suffering of the parents who had

lost children. Jesus knew, as did the prophets of old, that there is no deeper pain than the pain of losing a loved one and the pain of losing a loved one is magnified by 1000 when the loved one is your own child. Jesus wanted all of those who witnessed these miracles and all those who heard of them, to be thankful that the God of the universe is a God of incredible compassion and caring.

But even more than the message of God's compassion for the suffering of God's people, Jesus wanted all of us to know that there can be no greater love for anyone than the love God showed for us, when God allowed God's only son to die.

If God loves people enough to feel such deep compassion for them that the incarnate God steps up and changes the dead to the living to relieve suffering, how much more can we say that God loves us when that same God takes on the very same suffering we humans cannot stand, in order to redeem us from sin, from death, from ourselves.

Amen.