

Luke 7:11-17

After one of his successful military victories, Julius Caesar sent a brief message back to Rome: "Veni, Vidi, Vici" ("I came, I saw, I conquered"). In a way these words became his life's motto. It was under Julius Caesar that the ancient Roman Empire found its birth and experienced fantastic growth and social advancement. Although these words are fitting for Julius Caesar, they are hardly fitting for us. If we are honest with ourselves, "I came, I saw, I failed" are words which may better describe our endeavors in life. Or how about this one: "I came, I struggled, I quit." And even when we do persevere; even when we are successful; when we are proud of our achievements; when we can look back on a full, robust life, these words, for all of us, will close the final chapter: "I came, I lived, I died." Even for Julius Caesar, who lived with the motto "Veni, Vidi, Vici!" the final word was death--death by assassination at the hand of a trusted friend.

In the little town of Nain our text tells us that death there had also written the final chapter. A funeral procession was leaving the gate of the city. A young man had died and this death was a real tragedy. His mother was a widow and he had been her only son. Failure and defeat permeated the air. Nearly all of the townsfolk walked with her, their hearts full of sadness for her. But there was nothing they could do. When death closes the book on life, no one on earth has the power to rewrite the story. And for most people, therefore, this is how the story ends. When death comes, the end comes with it. No hope, no victory. The final words for most are no better than these: "I came, I lived the best I could, I died." But a life which ends in death is a real tragedy indeed.

In the town of Nain that tragedy became a victory because of Jesus. As the funeral procession was leaving the city, Jesus, with His disciples and a large crowd of followers, was walking toward the city. And if the words, "Veni, Vici, Vidi" were true of Julius Caesar, how much more true were they of our Lord! The message which God has given to you from what happened there in Nain that day is this: "Jesus came, Jesus saw, Jesus conquered!" He told the grieving mother not to weep. He brought the bier to a halt. And He said to the dead man, "Arise," and at once the man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. That day in Nain death did not close the final chapter. For that man and his mother, Jesus rewrote the story.

How is your story going? For many people it goes from one failure to another. Failed marriages, failed businesses, failed lives. Like the oil spill in the Gulf, failure and defeat have a way of permeating our lives and we are helpless to stop it. We want desperately to stop our bad habits, our sinful habits, but we are too weak. We want to heal broken relationships--some of which are within our own families--but we're afraid, fearful of making things even worse. We don't know what to say, what to do. We don't like it that we lose our temper too easily. We're sorry for angry words we have said, but we feel defeated. We don't have the strength to overcome or even to apologize when we should. Does it feel, at times, like you are being carried along in life upon the stretcher, the bier of defeat and death, and there is nothing you can do to stop it? Then you know how that grieving mother felt.

Jesus knows how you feel. Jesus knows your weaknesses, your failures. He knows you through and through--your sinfulness, your bad habits, your defeats. And as Jesus came to the little town of Nain, so today He is here in the little town of Augusta. He sees you being carried along in life. He sees that your sins and guilt, that your enemy Satan want desperately to bury you not just in defeat and failure, but in death forever. But friend, Jesus is here to rewrite your story; to change it from, "I lived, I struggled, I died," to "I lived in Christ, I died in Christ, I live with Him forever."

What Jesus had that day in Nain, He also has today for you. When He came and saw, we're told...He had compassion. So did the townspeople. So did the disciples and the crowd with Jesus. So do your friends and family when you have problems. But Jesus' compassion is different. When He has compassion He acts in mercy. He did not ask the mother, "Do you want Me to help?" He didn't even tell her what He planned to do. He just did it. He stopped the procession, touching the bier. "Arise," He said, and that mother's tears, in that moment, became only tears of joy.

Now some may wonder why Jesus does not act with such compassion today. Where was He Friday when the funeral procession carried Alma's body out to the grave? He was there receiving her into heaven because He acted out of compassion for her the day of her baptism. On that day, when she was an infant, as Satan was carrying her on the stretcher of death, Jesus within the waters stopped the procession and said to little Alma, "Young girl, I say to you arise!" And from that day on Alma lived in hope and victory.

That day happened for you when you were baptized into Christ. He told Satan to halt his procession and He gave you life with Him in those waters. As death had to flee from Nain when Jesus arrived, so death and Satan had to let go of you when Jesus arrived in your Baptism.

But does it seem, lately, like your enemies have returned? Although you are a Christian, Satan is not leaving you alone. Your sinful ways are getting stronger. Temptation is having its way with you. The devil's stretcher is back and he is trying, once again, to carry you away into death forever.

Dear friends, is it any wonder why you were taught in Confirmation Class to be faithful on Sunday mornings? Whenever you come to God's House you're coming to the town of Nain. This is the place where Jesus comes regularly to stop the procession and give life to you. Every one of us here is like that young man on the bier. Some of us are half-dead spiritually. Through the past week we have faltered. We have fallen from grace again and again. We have failed God. We have sinned against Him and against our neighbor. Others of us are more dead than that. You haven't been here with Christ for a longer time. His words of life are but a distant echo for you. And there may be some here today who, like the young man on the bier, are completely dead. No spiritual life in Christ at all, no faith at all.

But that doesn't stop Jesus from having compassion. Whatever story you have been writing for your life; whether you are spiritually sick, half-dead, or all the way dead, Jesus today writes a different story for you. And the last words are not, "I died." Today Jesus comes, Jesus sees, and Jesus conquers. He conquers your sin. He forgives you. Your slip-ups, your sins of weakness, your rebellious sins...He is here with mercy and forgives you now for them all. He conquers your fears. He is for you; it matters not who is against you. He conquers your death. Here today in His flesh and blood He gives you life--His life.

We buried Alma two days ago, and it was not a tragedy. No life that ends in Christ is a tragedy; it's a victory. That's why He is here now for you. Because whatever your story has been, He rewrites it for you, and death does not close the final chapter. In Christ there is no final chapter. The joy, the life, the victory go on forever. May your motto always be, "I lived in Christ, I died in Christ, I am with Christ forever in heaven." Amen.