

The Third Sunday after Pentecost: June 5, 2016

The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: 1 Kings 17:17-24 & Luke 7:11-17

Title: Good Grief

In today's Hebrew Scripture and Gospel lessons, we heard two remarkably stories of someone coming back from the dead. My guess is that if you asked most Christians if anyone other than Jesus had ever come back to life they would say, "sure. Lazarus." But the Bible contains eight (clearly less famous) such accounts. The story we just heard about Elijah is the first, but his successor, Elisha, is credited with bringing two people back from death. Jesus raised not only the man from Nain and Lazarus, but also the daughter of Jairus, a religious leader. And the apostles Peter and Paul are also credited with this miraculous deed.

To be totally honest, I've always been a bit troubled by these stories. There seems to me to be a fundamental difference between *resuscitation* and *resurrection*. In each of the cases of a someone coming back, things presumably went more or less back to normal for them. They were dead and then they were alive. They were dead and then they were eating, drinking, sleeping, working, living, loving, and, ultimately, dying once more. Not so with Jesus. When he came back to life, not only was he never the same, but all of creation was remade, redeemed, restored, right along with him. When someone was resuscitated, they defied death. When Jesus was resurrected, he destroyed it. So what, then, is the hope of these stories, the hope of resuscitation?

Three months after I delivered my first child, Safina, a friend of mine from high school also gave birth to a daughter, Annie. She was beautiful. Happy. Silly. An utter joy to her mother and father. We celebrated the small victories of early parenthood together and commiserated about the seemingly endless challenges, watching each other's children grow and thrive. And then, one day when Annie was almost three months old herself, she didn't wake up from her afternoon nap. Her death was crushing. Senseless. It left a void so profound and vacuous in my friend's heart that her grief was all-consuming. It was painful to walk with her through this. I cried every time I thought of them.

For a long time – a very long time – all she wanted was for Annie to come back. She didn't want to grieve. She didn't want to let go. She didn't want to move on. (In fact she probably still finds some of those ways of framing grief a bit disturbing.) All she knew was that every moment that passed took her further and further from the moments she had shared with Annie, and that growing distance seemed wrong and unbearable much of the time.

I imagine this is how the widow in Zarephath felt when she realized there was no breath left in her son; that this is how the widow in Nain felt as her only son was carried out of her home. So when Elijah and Jesus gave these women back their only child, they were giving *them* back their lives, too. Because that's the thing about death, about loss, about grief: it kills those of us left behind as well.

We are relational beings. We are who we are because of the intricate, elegant network of relationships that makes us *us*, and when we loose someone we love, someone we trust, someone we depend on; when we loose a part of ourselves, a community we rely upon, or a sense of innocence or wonder in the world, we also die. We loose who we were before that loss, and we are forever changed. We can heal from these losses, but we never go back to normal, even if someday we discover a different and even delightful new normal.

And this, to me, is what makes resuscitation and resurrection so different. Resuscitation removes the need for grief. Everything returns to the way it was. And there is a gift in that. As both scripture passages attest, often when we get a glimpse of a life radically altered by loss, and then find ourselves spared from that reality, we move closer to God. We believe more deeply. We cherish the precious ordinariness of our lives all the more. We are quicker to name our gratitude and celebrate small joys. But resurrection is different. Resurrection is the pattern of a healthy experience of grief. It is the movement not away from death but through it into new life. When we mourn the loss of a person, a relationship, a community, when we give ourselves over to the confusion and hurt and keep our hearts open, God, somehow, transforms these things into seeds of hope and possibility. God, somehow, works a different miracle, creating something new where before there was only emptiness and pain.

Sometimes, it is true, we get a reprieve from grief ... the child that was lost comes home; the relationship that seemed damaged beyond repair is revived; the job or the check or the invitation comes through at the last minute; we are freed from bad habits or disease, and we get our old lives back. Generally speaking, this is what we all hope for when we first experience a major loss. That was one of the great revelations of the Kubler-Ross model of grief, introduced in 1969, marked by the five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. (I'll say here that most people familiar with grief now find this model helpful but limited, and affirm that there is no "right way" to grieve, no linear path forward.)

But at some point, when the prophet doesn't come, when things fall apart and the worst does happen, the only way forward is the resurrection road. As everyone I know who has survived major loss will tell you, it's no wonder we resist. The road is strange. The landscape is unfamiliar. Even Jesus, as we say each week in the Creed, had to walk through hell on his way to new life. No one wants this for themselves, even if, on the other side of death, they wouldn't have it any other way.

But the promise on the other side *is* new life. It doesn't always feel like a blessing. It doesn't always feel like a path cut by God's grace. But God promises see us through it: to give us glimpses of what is yet to come, to give us companions on our journey, to nourish us with God's own self until we find our way. Sometimes we will be spared the walk, and that is a gift. But sometimes it will be the only way forward, and there will be a strange and fierce blessing in that, too.

A few weeks ago my friend marked the one year anniversary of Annie's death. She celebrated her child's brief life by announcing the establishment of a foundation in her honor. She cried a lot. She spent the day with her family. And the next day she gave birth to her second daughter, in no way a replacement for Annie, but a gift and a joy and a blessing in her own right. This is not the life she would have wished for herself. She will, I believe, always miss Annie, always wish she could have her back. But at some point she chose resurrection, and then she chose it again, and again, and again. And God is seeing her through, just as God has seen us through our losses, just as God will see us through every loss to come, bringing us to some new and unimaginable place. **Amen.**