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Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Confrontation of Life and Death”

Text: Luke 7:11-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whenever someone dies, you know one thing for certain: that person was a sinner. It really doesn't matter whether a big sinner or a little sinner. ***“The wages of sin is death.”*** (Rom 6:23) If you sin, you die. If you die, you've sinned. It's as simple as that.

And you know, I don't think most people have a problem with that! Mankind has invested a lot of time and effort trying to deal with death, and make sense out of it. Perhaps we've grown numb to it. And so you'll hear people use such phrases as *“Death is just a part of life.”* That's like saying sin is just a part of perfection; or, hate is just a part of love; or, wrong is just a part of right. It's an utterly ridiculous saying! Life is life, and death is death. They're opposites. Life is a gift and death ends that gift. And that makes death not a friend, but the enemy. Yet death is an enemy that many people have made peace with.

But death will not be so easily tamed. And so even people who do not seem to have a problem with death itself, do often have a problem with the **when** and the **how** of death. We can handle death, as long as it's on my own terms. For example, a person who has lived a long and full life – its okay for them to die. Sad to be sure, but okay. However, a young person, a child, that's not okay! . . . I have often heard people say, *“I want to die in my sleep. I want to die quickly – not suffer and have it drag out.”* That kind of death is okay. But cancer, AIDS, Lou Gehrig's disease, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's – that's not. Parents dying before their children is okay (as long as its after the child is grown!); but a parent who has to bury a child, that's not. . . . Death shows that it is still the enemy when these things happen.

But it has now even gotten to the point where we want to control the when and the how of death – so much that people are killing themselves to control it. Assisted suicide, euthanasia, mercy killing. We want death to behave. We want to be in control. . . . But we're not in control. People die when we don't want them to. People die when we're not ready for them to, and at most inconvenient times. People die in ways we don't like. Car

accidents. Wars. Terrorism. Negligence. Crime. No matter what we have tried to do with death – tame it, control it, make peace with it, deny it – it is still the enemy.

So then what do we do? How do you deal with such an enemy? Do you appease it? Tolerate it? Try to contain it? **No, it must be defeated.**

Today we heard two stories of people who died *when* and *how* it was not wanted, when it was not okay. Children. The only sons of widows. Both then and now, this is not right. This is not how it is supposed to be!

The Holy Gospel tells us of a funeral procession that was coming out of the city of Nain – a small town not too far from Nazareth. And if you want to know what that looked like, picture the funeral processions you see on TV from the Middle East. Throngs of people walking around the person to be buried as they carry him through the streets with much mourning and wailing. And even more than usual in a case such as this. That is what was coming out of Nain that day. . . . But on this day, that great crowd is met by another – this one not mourning, but filled with joy and excitement and wonder. A crowd following Jesus, who (as we heard last week) had authority over diseases. There is a buzz about this crowd as they draw near to Nain. . . . And then right at the gate of the city, these two crowds meet. One going out, the other coming in. They both can't do both. Something has to give. Something has to change. One has to reverse course.

So which will it be? Which will give way? Life or death?

Jesus puts His hand out and touches the bier, the board carrying the dead, lifeless body of this widow's son. And the processions both stop. One big, marvelous divine traffic jam in the middle of the city gate! It probably began to grow quiet, and Jesus speaks twice. First to the widow He says, "***Stop crying.***" We say that too, at funerals. But it always sounds so hollow. We say it, but we can't do anything to stop the tears. We are so helpless in the face of sin and death. But Jesus then actually does something about it; something to stop the tears. He speaks to the dead boy: "***Young man, I say to you, arise.***" And the enemy is defeated. "***The dead one sat up and began to speak.***"

Jesus did not come to make peace with death. He did not come to contain it, appease it, or tolerate it. He came to defeat it. He came to defeat death because He came to defeat sin. And so what happened that day in the city gate of Nain is a picture of what happened on the cross. Life and death met, and something had to give. One had to reverse course.

It was for this very moment that Jesus came. This was the reason that "***God had visited His people.***" Yet as Jesus went to the cross, it looked as if the *when* and the *how* of death

was all wrong! There was still much more for Him to do; much more for Him to speak; many more for Him to heal and raise and take care of! This was too soon. Mothers shouldn't have to bury their children. The Son of God shouldn't die this way! . . . *But the Son of God had to die this way.* To take our death-causing sin upon Himself and pay its wages. To die in the most brutal and ugly and humiliating way; to face death at its worst, in its most twisted and true form. To die like we die. For death is not beautiful, it is not peaceful, it is not a friend, it is not a part of life – it is the enemy. The enemy that had to be confronted, and defeated.

And so for this very moment Jesus came. Despite appearances, the *when* and the *how* of His own death He would and did control. In this confrontation, no one could take His life from Him. He had the power to lay down His life, and the power to take it up again. (Jn 10:18) And so the true, only-begotten Son, the son of a widow named Mary, takes the place of the dead man on the funeral bier, takes our place in the grave, and takes the place of every sinner who ever lived, that in dying the death of all He might defeat the death of all. And on Easter morning, He did! He rises from death not at the word of another, but in His own power and authority. The same power and authority that forced sin and death to retreat at Nain now completely defeats death in the resurrection of Jesus. And so death is defeated – not just for one, but for all.

And for this moment Jesus continues to come to us today. That He might confront the sin and death in us and speak those same words to us, ***“I say to you, arise.”*** And as He comes to us, as God visits His people today in His Word and Sacraments, this is exactly what is happening. The gate of the city of Nain today is the water of Holy Baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion, the Word of God that is written and proclaimed. It is exactly in those places where the sin and death in us is met and confronted with the life of God. And something has to give. . . . So when the voice of the One that death obeyed at Nain *touches our ears*, when He says, *“I forgive you all your sins,”* they are forgiven. When the One that death could not hold in the grave *touches our head* in the waters of Holy Baptism, and He declares that you have died and risen with Him and gotten the *when* and the *how* of your death taken care of in Him, it is true. And when the One who battled death on the cross touches our lips and tongues and says to you that in His true body and blood given to you in Holy Communion is the forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation of the Son of God, these are yours. In all these ways, we come to Him in sin and death, and He says to us ***“arise.”*** And we do. Death is defeated. Our sin is defeated. And we, like the son of the widow of Nain, now live a new life.

That is the new life that was given to Paul, that he writes of in Galatians. A new life that can change a persecutor of the Church into a great apostle. This was no self-help plan. Only a death and resurrection could change such a man. And only a death and

resurrection could change sinners like you and me. And in Christ, that is exactly what has happened. For this is the reason **“God has visited His people.”** To confront us – fully dead, fully sinners, fully without hope and in mourning – and to give us life. Life through the forgiveness of sins.

And yet this confrontation between life and death here on earth, in God’s Word and Sacraments, is only a prelude to the ultimate confrontation, which is coming soon. When Jesus returns and two great crowds again meet – when all who have died are raised to life, and Jesus returns with all the Heavenly Host. And those who were given a new life, a life of faith here and now, will enter with our Saviour into the Heavenly City. Where there is no sin, no tears, no death. And at that time, just as we do now, we will glorify God and sing His praise. We will not be able to do otherwise. For the victory of the Lamb of God will have come in all its fullness. We will join the angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven, evermore praising God and singing: *“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of Sabaoth; Heaven and earth are full of your glory! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”*

Blessed is He . . . For He has done what we could not do. He has given us freely what we could not earn. He has confronted sin and death, and won. And just as this report about Him **“spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding region”** – may it also now spread through the whole of Vienna and all the surrounding region. For once you were dead; but now, you are alive, in Christ!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.