

Theme: Saving a life

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your son went to great lengths to provide compassion to insignificant and unlikely people: please come to us who do not find our names in the NEW YORK TIMES doing or saying great things; for you look on the lives of all people, rich and poor, and you give us comfort, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jim Taylor offers this very weird story, “The most intriguing news items don’t always have big headlines. For example, I found a three-paragraph story buried on an inside page, about a court that ‘ordered the siblings of a man who died more than a year ago to exhume his body so that his head can be cut off and cryogenically frozen.’”

It turns out that Orville Richardson died in February of 2009. His wife died before he did and they had no children. His brother and sister managed his estate.

“However, five years before, Orville had paid \$53,500 for membership in Alcor Life Extension Foundation. A series of documents authorized Alcor to take possession of Orville’s remains immediately after death so that his head and brain could undergo ‘cryonic suspension.’ Cryonics applies those low temperatures to preserve human tissue until science can restore that tissue to life.”

Alcor learned of Orville’s death when his brother tried to get the \$53,500 back. Alcor sued and lost. “The Ohio Appeals Court ruled in Alcor’s favor. David and Darlene must now dig up their brother’s body, decapitate it, and deliver the head to Alcor for freezing in liquid nitrogen.

“So Alcor calls for quick intervention -- within two minutes of death, not later than 15 minutes after death – ‘to prevent loss of information within the brain that encodes memory and personality identity, the true boundary between life and death.’

“One wonders what condition Orville Richardson’s brain cells will be in after a year underground. One also has to wonder what benefit cryonic

treatment might offer even if Orville's brain had been frozen within minutes of death. Because Orville spent the final years of his life institutionalized with dementia. So there wasn't a lot of brain left to preserve.

“Why would anyone want to come back to life after a century or so in suspended animation? Who would you know? Who could you turn to for orientation in this utterly confusing new world? You would be more alone than any previous human being has been.

This is the same company that has Ted Williams' head. “Those who turn to cryonics today clearly have not abandoned the quest for immortality. But they have put their faith in technology. What medical science cannot yet do, it will eventually be able to do -- if one can defer decay long enough.

“But let's not kid ourselves. This is an act of faith, not science. The chicken breasts in my freezer may never rot. But they won't regain life, either.”

But . . . then again, maybe the dead can come back to life – at least, if they keep their head on their shoulders.

Jesus travels from Capernaum to Nain. Nain is south of Nazareth. It's a small town of little account. It is unusual to read that Jesus would go to Nain from Capernaum. He also bypassed his hometown of Nazareth. It seems that Nazareth is no longer is home to him.

We don't know why he was going to Nain, but he went. And it was just not him. His disciples and a great crowd followed. Can you imagine this sight? This huge crowd of people, walking to Nain, is trailed by this large dust cloud. And this is about an eight hour, uphill walk. I would have hated to be at the end of this group. I wouldn't be hungry after eating all of that dust.

Nain is a walled city. Recent excavations indicate that there was only one gate through the wall into the city. The crowd approached the gate as a funeral procession leaves the gate. Burials happened outside of cities. The dead man was the only son of a widow.

This is a particularly sad scene. This meant economic disaster for the widow. Men were required to provide food and shelter in Jesus' time. This means she is penniless and homeless. She has also lost her status in the community.

In the society of Jesus' time, this widow was just as dead as her son. Only she is left behind to suffer. This is also why widows and orphans receive special mention in the Old Testament cajoling people to care for them.

Most of the town turns out for the funeral procession, which wouldn't amount to a great deal of people. The widow is distraught. She is grieving for her son and probably also for her predicament. Jesus sees her in the crowd and has compassion for her. He is moved by her presence. Jesus tells her not to cry.

Jesus then walks to the funeral stretcher and touches it, thereby making himself ritually unclean. The ones carrying the stretcher stop. They are probably shocked that someone would risk their status by touching the stretcher. Jesus has just ended the funeral procession.

Jesus then says to the dead body like it is a real person, "Young man – get up!" Luke here quotes 1 Kings 17:23 when Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath. Luke intentionally wishes to portray Jesus as Elijah. The dead man got up and started talking. He apparently had some things to say that his death prevented him from saying. Jesus then presented the man to his mother.

The place was gripped with fear. Sometimes, people react in this way to a miracle, because they want to believe, but find it hard. Sometimes, when people realize that they are in the presence of someone or something holy, they are reminded of their own sinfulness. This can cause great dread. For those of us who are ambivalent about miracles, then this story is for you.

They praised God. They said, "A great prophet has arrived! God is visiting God's people!" A procession of death has turned into a procession of life. Word about Jesus spread all over Judea and throughout the region.

We do no service trying to explain away a miracle, just because we are uncomfortable with something we have no explanation for. We can't explain everything. There simply are some things that defy explanation. I think this is one of those times. Jesus gave life back to someone who was dead. That's pretty dynamic.

At first blush, this is a story about a young man who is raised from the dead. But I believe that this story is a story of compassion for a widow in a tough bind. Raising her son from the dead will give the widow life. Jesus is not, necessarily, saving the son's life. He is saving the widow's life. Without her son, she faces a life of homelessness and extreme poverty likely resulting in her death within months. Jesus was saving *her* life.

This is the first time in Luke's gospel that he refers to Jesus as Lord. We all experience life outside the gate – outside of our secure places. But God is at work in all places even those that seem dangerous and scary. This story is a story about God's love for the expendable, the forgotten, and the vulnerable. Jesus' compassion for the widow is the same compassion Jesus asks of all his followers. We are called to be signs of God's visitation. This story also points to God's concern for us even in death. We are still beings worthy of God's love even after death.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, we give you thanks for the gift of life: for our life now and for our life eternally with you; help us to make the most of our opportunities, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Luke 7:11–17** (NRSV)

¹¹ Soon afterwards^b he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² As he 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^c gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. ¹

^b Other ancient authorities read *Next day*

^c Gk *he*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 7:11–17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.