

Third Sunday after Pentecost; June 26, 2022

+ Luke 17:1-11 +

Come, Visit Nain...and Stay Forever

Soon afterward Jesus went on his way to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd were traveling with him. As he was approaching the town gate, there was a dead man being carried out, the only son of his mother. She was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not cry." He went up to the open coffin, touched it, and the pallbearers stopped. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Fear gripped all of them, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us" and "God has visited his people!" This was reported about him in all Judea and in all the surrounding countryside.

Not long ago, I had four solid weeks of vacation staring me down. I had decisions to make. Where will I go? What will I see? Also, where will I not go? What places don't make the cut for me? Where can I go the rest of my life without saying, "I've been there!"

If you were living in Israel at the time of Jesus' ministry, and you had free time to visit places, the tiny town of Nain would probably not rise above the cutline for most people. Not only small, but isolated, several miles from the nearest decent-sized town. As far as we know, no great historical figure came from Nain. No one famous lived there. Nothing in world history textbooks ever happened there.

But today, I would like you to come with me and visit this humble town. If you do come and visit Nain with me, I think it you will find it such a beautiful place that you will want to stay forever. And I hope you do.

But it will take a while to see the beauty. First, we have to see some ugliness, perhaps the ugliest thing there is: a mother burying her child, her only son. Sometimes when I look at artwork of this story, I see an adolescent or a young boy. But Luke clearly calls the dead person a "man." Jesus calls him a "young man," but still, a man.

So then it's not quite so bad, right? At least his mother got to watch him grow up, and he didn't die a child. But actually, this makes his mother's situation even more desperate than if her son had been a child. She is a widow, which means she has no husband to provide for her. She likely was relying on this son, her only son, to take care of her. And because he is a grown man when he dies, she will likely be too old to remarry and have more children. Those were the realities of her culture.

So you see, for this widow it's not just the horrible grief of having to bury a child. She is now facing loneliness and destitution. She hasn't just lost her son, she's lost everything. This is not a world with social security and food banks.

Aren't you glad you came to Nain with me? Don't worry, you will be in a minute!

One thing a small town like Nain does have going for it is compassion. When one person dies in a small town, the whole town grieves. Pallbearers are carrying the dead man through the city gates to be buried outside the town. Luke says a large crowd is there to grieve with the now childless widow. They have compassion on her.

But because they are only human, their compassion can only do so much. They can only cry with her. They cannot change her situation.

But there is another crowd, following a man who also has compassion. But this man, with his own large crowd, has more than compassion. He has the power to help.

What other person, in either of these large crowds meeting at Nain's gate, could dare to say to that widow, "Do not cry."? What other person, in either crowd that is now surrounding that corpse, would have the nerve? Would you dare to say such a thing to a mother in that situation?

Jesus does. Because he not only has compassion. He has power over death. He says, "**Do not cry,**" because he can also say, "**Young man, I say to you, get up!**" And then there is no delay. The dead man doesn't need to warm up like a car in winter. Instantly he sits up and speaks. Jesus' control of death is immediate and total.

And the result is beautiful. It is marvelous that Luke doesn't just say, "His mother took him back," or "He went back to his mother," but instead: **Jesus gave him to his mother.** When Jesus raises, he does it with reunion in mind. He does it not only to give life to the dead, but joy to the living. Now that Jesus has given her son back to her, she has joy again, and hope for her own life.

Two crowds have come together to see it: the crowd that was mourning the young man, and the crowd that was following Jesus from Capernaum. They give glory to God, and speak the truth about Jesus. "**A great prophet has risen among us,**" they say. And that's true. But it's important they also recognize that Jesus is more than a prophet: "**God has visited his people!**" Jesus stands with them as God. He is full of compassion. But God also the power to raise the dead, and to give them back to reunion and joy.

Aren't you glad you came to Nain? I knew you would be! When you come to visit Nain, you see Jesus, true God, conquer death because not only does he have compassion, but he has death under his thumb. Come to Nain and see this up close, and the happy reunion that follows.

This time, in Nain, is first time Jesus raises someone from the dead. The next time will be the daughter of Jairus, when Jesus will again give a child back to her mother and father. For both of these resurrections, crowds see the compassion and power of Jesus to raise the dead and give them back to the living. But, the thing is: both of those resurrections happen the north, in Galilee, far away from the capital of Jerusalem, in the south of Israel. And they both happen in a world without cameras and microphones, and in a country where the testimony of people up in the backward north...well, who can really believe what a northerner says? And who knows? Maybe it's all a ruse. Maybe those people weren't really dead. Maybe they were faking. Maybe it was all choreographed.

But then, later, Jesus comes south. He comes to a town called Bethany, which is right next door – just a couple miles away – from Jerusalem. And there he shows his compassion and power over death in a way that cannot be ignored or dismissed or explained away. This time, the man has been dead for four days. He's wrapped, in a tomb. When Jesus asks for the grave to be opened, the man's sisters object: he's been dead so long he will stink. Not only that, but this dead man is prominent. He's very well known among the religious movers and shakers in the capital, who have come to mourn him in person.

And that day, at Bethany, Jesus again shows the compassion of his heart, and the power of his word, to defeat death. A well-known man, dead four days, a resurrection no one can deny, so close to Jerusalem, witnessed by so many credible people.

That day, too, Jesus raises the dead and creates a joyful reunion for that man Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. But when Jesus raises Lazarus in Bethany, Jesus' enemies do not react like the folks in Nain. They don't say, "A prophet! More than a prophet! God himself is here!" No, their hearts are already hard against him. So instead they say, "We have to get rid of him now. We can't deny anymore that he can raise the dead. People know what Lazarus looks like. They know he was dead. If they see Lazarus walking around in Jerusalem everyone will follow this guy instead of us. We have to get rid of him. Now."

And, later that week, they did. Later that week, they nailed the one who holds power over death to the cross, so that he would die. The one who raises to life and reunites in joy dropped into death. And before he did, he was separated from his heavenly Father. He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He and his heavenly Father were torn apart, while he suffered hell in our place.

Why did Jesus let this happen to him? For the same reason he walked toward the gates of Nain: He has compassion for people. And more than compassion, he has the power to raise to life and reunite with joy.

Jesus died for us because we were dead. Scripture says we were dead in our trespasses and sins. Death is separation. Because of our sins we were separated from our heavenly Father. That is spiritual death, and that is where we stood with God. Dead in sin and separated from him.

Jesus went to the cross because he had compassion for us. He wanted to raise us back to spiritual life and give us a joyful reunion with our Father – our heavenly Father. But compassion without the power to help does nothing to help anyone. In order to help you can't just feel for someone, you have to be in a position to do something effective for them. As the Son of God, Jesus was. He had the power to take the sins of the whole world on his back, to go through hell – spiritual death and separation from the Father – in the place of every human soul as he died on the cross.

When Jesus died for us on that cross, he had compassion on us and used his power as the Son of God to bring us to life and bring us back to God. The result is a joyful reunion with our heavenly Father. We are now his children through faith in Jesus. And we will be forever. We have joy with our Father, and with each other in his divine family. And we always will.

Are you starting to see the true beauty of this place called Nain? At Nain, we see that Jesus loves sinners and wants to help them by giving them life and joy together. And he can, because he's the Son of God. That's the flash of truth he showed at Nain, and it burst into full effect on the cross.

But remember, the beauty of Nain doesn't stop there. Because Jesus' life-giving power doesn't stop, even at the cross. It doesn't stop until the empty grave of Easter. In the empty tomb we see Jesus' ultimate power over death, and the depth of his love for sinners like you and me. Not only does the cross of Jesus raise us to spiritual life and reunite God and us, his empty tomb promises us that the physical resurrection of Nain is ours, too.

So picture this: Nain times several billion. A day when all believers will rise and be reunited in joy. A day when you will see your parents and grandparents again, a day when mothers will see their boys again and sisters will see their sisters and husbands will see their wives and all Christians will embrace all Christians

– in the flesh. A day is coming when Jesus will say to all his people: “Get up!” And there will be a joyful reunion of physical resurrection. He will give all Christian sons back to their mothers, and all Christians to each other on the last day, for a joyful reunion that never ends.

This is what we see in Nain: physical resurrection and joyful reunion that is, again, just a little snip of a greater promise: a day when all Christians rise and reunite in the new heavens and earth.

Now, aren't you glad you came to visit Nain? I hope you are. So...why not stay a while? In fact, why not stay a long while? Why not live in Nain?

Live knowing the heart and power of Jesus Christ. He is the one who feels for those who die. And he is the Son of God, who has the ability to help. He shows this at Nain. Remember it. Live in it. Remember how his heart and his mighty arm raised that young man and gave him back to his mother again.

And remember it was just a little shot of what he was going to do for you on the cross. In compassion, with power, he went to give life to your soul by forgiving your sins. In compassion, with power, he went to the cross to reunite you with your Father.

So, live in joy as your Father's child. Know your sins are forgiven and that you are right with him forever. Go to him prayer. Thank him for the faith of your baptism. When troubles assault, run to him for refuge. Jesus died to bring you back to the Father. Live in the peace and joy of knowing you are his.

And remember that what Jesus did at Nain was also just a little shot of what he will do for all of his people on the Last Day. Look forward to hearing him say to you and to all your family in Christ, “Get up!” Look forward to that reunion in the heavenly kingdom, where there will be nothing but joy with every Christian you love.

What the people in Nain said is true: God has visited his people. He has visited us with love and power, to raise us to life and bring us back together. He did it at Nain. Stay in Nain, remembering that what he did there for that young man and his mother he also did for you on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Amen.