

“Rise”

A Sermon by The Reverend Katie Crowe

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Our text this final week of Wednesday Worship comes to us from Luke 7:11-17. It is a scene from his ministry of teaching and healing. Listen now to the Word of God.

“Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then Jesus came forward and touched the casket and those carrying the casket stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 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!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.” Here ends our reading. The Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

A man had died, he was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow. These are three very important pieces of information that Luke gives to us. A man died, he was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow. There are great tragedies embedded in these details. The death of a young man, certainly, is a terrible thing. But for a mother to outlive her child is something different altogether, especially after she had already buried a husband. This woman had suffered very much in her life, and a crowd gathered with her. Perhaps some in this crowd had celebrated with her when the child she had waited so long for was finally born. Perhaps some had comforted her in the painful weeks and months after losing a spouse. They had been there through joy and through sorrow. And now tragedy has struck her life once again. We can all in some way understand her sorrow because death touches all of our lives. And most likely all of us at some time or another has known what it is like to feel despair. But this was in the context of the ancient world, remember. This woman lost something else besides her husband and her child day, she lost her identity as well. In the ancient world there were two socially sanctioned stations for a woman (sorry, ladies), she could be either (one) a daughter in her father’s house or (two) a wife in her husband’s home, but that was pretty much it.

Consider that a woman’s worth was wrapped up in her ability to carry on the covenant line in the Hebrew tradition so society knows what to do with her if she is preparing to carry on the line or is actively working to carry on the line. But single women. Women who struggled with infertility. Divorced women. Widows- they were in a social no-man’s land. Which made them an anomaly and a threat and it made them vulnerable. Women by and large had status in the community because of the men in their lives. Women had social rites in a society because of the men in their lives. Women usually could not earn their own income. Women could not receive an education. And so this woman had lost more than her loved ones, she had also lost a large portion of herself, her place in the community, her economic security, her rites. She lost her future. And the crowd that gathered with her would have known that in more ways than one this woman would have felt like she had also lost all hope. Her future seemed as though nothing good would ever come to her again.

I think that we all also know what it is to feel like we have no hope. I do not have to tell any of you that life can be so very difficult because we have all been in situations that are out of our control. We have all faced circumstances that are painful that we do not understand- been confronted with questions we cannot answer. We have all felt helpless. We have all felt fear over what the future might hold. We have all at times wondered who am I and what in the world am I supposed to be doing here. We have all had experiences in our lives when we have felt that there is no hope. And we have all experienced those dark moments that make us feel as though nothing good will ever come to us again. When the future seems impossibly out of reach. These feelings do not come from a lack of faith, they come from being human. But when Jesus saw the funeral passing by he did not just continue along his way. Ours is a God who not only walks through the world, but impacts it. Jesus saw the woman in her despair and he had compassion. He reached out his hand, touched the casket, and said “rise”.

But he did not just reach out to the dead man and say, “rise.” He also reached out to the woman’s sorrow and said, “rise!” He reached out to her fear about the future and said, “rise!” He reached out to her discouragement and said, “rise!” He reached out to her hopelessness and said, “rise!” He reached out to the dead man and said ‘rise’ and the woman’s son rose from the dead. The widow’s only son rose from the dead. And with her son, her sorrow, her future, her hope rose from the dead too. Suddenly there was possibility with Jesus. Suddenly there was a future with Jesus because this is what Jesus does. He gives us new life when we can see only finality, he ushers in the kingdom of God when we only see our very human realities, he shows up and gives us reason to hope.

Christ did this out of love for the woman certainly, but he also did this to show the crowd that nothing is more powerful than the love of God. If Christ can overcome even the power of death to defeat us and drag us down then surely nothing is impossible with God. There is no situation so difficult that it is without hope. There is no circumstance so painful that God is not present there. There is no sorrow or fear so strong that God’s love and power is not stronger. There is no wound so deep that his mercy cannot heal, no sin so unforgivable that his grace does not cover it. O grave, where is your victory? Paul would taunt the forces of this world, ‘O death, where is your sting?’ This was the gospel Jesus proclaimed by simply reaching out his hand. With a simple touch and a word he brought the power of God to shape a woman’s entire world and to bring a man to life. And as followers of a living Christ, we must reclaim our identity as disciples of the one who says, ‘rise.’

Perhaps it is because we have been so inundated with bad news, or are so accustomed to there being nothing new under the sun that we have completely lost our imagination for what is possible with a living God in the world. It is as if we have grown perfectly content with our low expectations for life and for ourselves and for one another and for God. The crowd that gathered with the woman that day had seen all this before. The widow and childless mother knew the routine of grief all too well. But then Jesus showed up and shattered their understanding of what was possible with a word- ‘rise’.

How many things about our world have we put in the grave with our assumptions about how things are just always going to be? How many situations have we written off as hopeless? How many obstacles in our culture have we determined are simply too massive to overcome? How many problems have we resigned to being simply too vast to be moved with any touch of ours? Or too complex to influence with any word we may have to share? It is so easy to slip into a defeatist mentality when we hold up our meager abilities next to the great problems of the world. But we forget that it is not our power

that we rely on, but God's power that goes before us and God's power within us that dares to look every circumstance in the eye and tell it to rise.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not about weighing probability but proclaiming possibility even when it seems the last chapter has been written, the final verse sung, the closing argument concluded, even when it seems the future has been decided and there is simply nothing more to say from matters ranging from the mundane to the vital. This is not a naive blue-sky approach to life. This is what it means to follow a God who redeems. Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of that which is unseen. Contrary to popular belief, we have not seen all this before. And we don't know how the story is going to end.

We may certainly influence its outcome if we think we do and react out of our certainty. Or we can live lives out of the expectation that God will show up and act in mighty and redemptive ways. Ways that we can be a part of if we are willing to look squarely at our convictions, our assumptions, our resignations and tell them to rise... What can be moved by a simple touch and what difference can be made with a word? Let your imaginations rise. Because that simple touch that seems that it can do no good at all is the touch of our Savior that pushed death off its throne and raised a man from the grave. And that single word is the name of Jesus who is the power of God to bring about resurrection and redemption and hope in all things. This is our God. And we are his people. And by the Holy Spirit that same power that was in Jesus is in you.

It is the power of God's love that has sustained the church for some 2000 years in the way it emboldens people to be witnesses to the faith when times get hard. It is the power of God's love to make Christ's presence real by the way you show up when someone is hurting and broken. It is the power of God's love to bring dignity when you honor the image of Christ in everyone. This power can shape someone's entire world. It can cast a vision for a future where there was once no hope. So raise your expectations for when and how God will act, raise your assumption that the Spirit goes before you into all things, and equipped with this hope participate in God's work to raise yourself, raise your workplace, raise your family, raise our community and raise our world to newness of life. It is not that we are powerless in the face of the great challenges and anxieties before us. It is that we are powerful beyond measure to revive and recreate with God. And if not us with Christ in us, then who?

As we prepare to go out into the summer months, we pause at the table before us to be nourished for the charge of discipleship- strengthened by the elements of bread and cup and the grace they represent so that we can be agents of healing and hope in the world. Revived by Christ's touch and word in our lives, and equipped with Christ's spirit to shape our world in incredible ways for the kingdom when we join the woman in our story and her son and Jesus and rise- touch and speak and claim the future God has prepared. For he is with us now and we have reason to hope. Amen.