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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, Annapolis
Sermon for Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 10, 2007

Lessons: 1 Kings 17:17-24, Luke 7:11-17

Customs around death are different in different places. I have a vivid memory of the moment I experienced a different culture around a funeral. I was sitting in the backseat of a car on the way to a funeral in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi. An elderly man was riding his bike through town, but when he saw the hearse and the funeral procession, he stopped his pedaling, got off his bike, and removed his baseball cap. He bowed his head. He stayed like that for a spell, long enough for all the cars in the procession to go by. The reverence of this man, who I presume was a stranger to the deceased person, surprised me. I found his simple gesture reassuring, and kind, and respectful. And though I will never know who he is or what he was thinking, he acted as a reminder of God's compassion to me. His gesture was a work of love.

Funeral customs in Jesus' day had a particular culture. Being a part of the funeral at that time was seen as a work of love, a custom familiar to some of us here. Crowds gathered quickly upon hearing of a death. The body would be prepared and laid upon a wicker basket. The wicker basket would be carried out of town to the cemetery. The dead were considered unclean, and so the cemetery had to be outside of the city limits. Archeologists believe that they have found this town of Nain and its cemetery, about a ten minute walk from where the city gates were located.

And this is where we enter today's Gospel-somewhere between the city gates and the cemetery. Jesus and his disciples, and a large crowd of people, approach the town of Nain. Coming toward them is another large crowd of people, in distress and weeping. The crowd is perhaps larger than is customary for a funeral procession- giving Jesus and his followers a sense that the death is an especially tragic one. Jesus and his followers see the body on the wicker basket, and they stop in their path in a display of reverence and respect.

As they pause, they begin to hear information about the situation. "Someone has died this morning," they hear. "And it was a young person," another offers. "He was the only son his mother had", comes the voice of another. "And the mother is a widow," adds someone else.

The situation gets progressively worse as they hear these facts. It was a tragedy upon a tragedy upon another tragedy. I respond most to the **emotional** tragedy of this situation. I respond most to the sheer emotional tragedy of losing a child, and how unbearable this loss must have been for the mother. And yet the death of this young man was also a **social and economic** tragedy. The social standing of the mother is in jeopardy without a male family member. The economic tragedy of this death would have been instantly recognized by all who heard of the situation- a widow has lost her only son. She lost her ability to have a male bread-winner in her household and her ability for respectable income was greatly diminished. There was no social security to collect, no retirement fund or pension. Her future was bleak, certainly it would include poverty, hunger, disease.

Jesus was touched by this tragedy. The compassion of God responded to the pain of this situation. He grieves with this mother. Jesus, God-with-us-Immanuel, comes to live among us and to offer us the compassionate love of God in human form. Jesus, God in the flesh, experiences the heart break of this woman with her. He reaches out to the wicker basket and touches it- this was not commonly done, in fact, it made Jesus ritually unclean. He stepped over the boundary of purity and impurity to touch the pain of this woman, and he commanded the young man to rise. Which he did, speaking as he returns to life. I wonder what he said...

And his mother, with her son returned to life and placed into her arms, what words could have possibly come out of her mouth to convey her joy? Did she know that Jesus was God-come-to-be-

with-us in human flesh? Did she believe? Luke doesn't tell us if she believed. There is nothing in these verses to indicate she believed in Jesus before or after this miracle in which her only son is restored to life.

What about all of us: Do we believe that God can restore the dead areas of our life? Do we believe that God can heal our tragedies and return us to life? Regardless of whether or not you and I believe in God, God is working among us. God is working to redeem the world regardless of how we *feel* about God. God's compassion for us in our tragedies, in our deepest places of pain, does not come to us *because* we believe. God's compassion comes to us *because God loves us*. God created us, and God's heart breaks when our hearts break. Regardless of how we feel about God, God loves us. God, in God's compassion, loves us so much that God has come to be with us in Jesus. God comes to us in our deep tragedy, God comes to us in our deep joy. Our belief, or lack of belief, has no bearing on whether or not Jesus is among us, performing acts of compassion. God is at work among us whether we believe or not.

So does it matter if we believe, then? Yes, it does. Our belief matters because it cracks open our awareness of God at work in the world. Our belief cracks open our ability to watch a miracle performed right in our midst.

Have you ever experienced a miracle? Have you ever experienced a miraculous transformation? Many of you have miracle stories to tell with others – which I hope you will dare to do. There have been miracles where illness has been healed or addiction has been overcome or broken relationships have been restored – through prayer and Christian action, or just because God has compassion. Miracles come in all shapes and sizes. Miracles come in the form of a generous check, an unexpected phone-call, a sudden concern for the watershed we live within, or one of those serendipitous and healing kitchen conversations that result in a hug – oven mitts and all- right in the middle of getting dinner ready for the hungry crowd in the dining room. Miracles happen in the workplace, on the road, and within individual hearts.

Jesus performs miracles that transform us in the midst of all sorts of situations and tragedies. We struggle to figure out how Jesus performs miracles and why some find healing while others do not. For those of us who believe in Jesus or are at least trying to figure out how to believe in Jesus, a big part of believing in Jesus means believing that Jesus can change us and the world around us. That Jesus can transform us, heal us, raise us to new life. It seems to me that if something in you is hurting or dying, if something in your life deeply needs the transforming miracle touch of God who has come to be with us it **is wise to cross paths with Jesus**.

We need contact with Christ, especially when tragedy hits. Jesus touched that wicker basket, with his hands. That's what we need to be transformed into new life – we need the touch of Jesus' hand. It's not the same as sitting home alone and believing – it means getting our bodies where we will find Jesus, and be in touch with Jesus. We must carry the deepest pains we have into the presence of Christ. We must allow Jesus to get up close and stop the funeral procession, to share in the heart break with us and reach out his hands to touch us. We must hear his words, and let the breath of new life enter us.

Do not hide the dead parts of yourself from Christ. Get yourself, all of yourself, including your hurts and your broken places, into the presence of Christ. You have the responsibility to figure out where you can go to feel that presence, that compassionate touch of Christ's hands.

Today we worship here together because we know it's a place to be with God it's not the only place to be with God, but it's a place where we are intentional and communal about seeking God. We are wise to cross paths with Jesus. We are wise to stop whatever we are doing that seems so important, to stand still and take off our baseball caps and bow our heads in reverence.

Today our paths cross with the healing presence of God. We find ourselves in contact with the transforming, life-giving touch of Christ. You have come to be touched by the compassion of the one who loves us so much that he came to live among us in Jesus. Receive the touch of Christ wherever you need it most.