



Seeing someone you thought was dead rise to life has to be one of the worst horrors and one of the greatest miracles. There is even something known as a “safety” or “security” coffin so that if the person is not dead but alive, he or she can pull on a string and a bell will ring at ground level alerting friends or family that the person is not dead but alive.

Two stories today about someone believed to be dead rising to life. And the two stories today- one in First Kings and the second in the Gospel of Luke - are not the only stories of this type of event in the Bible. After all, the Gospel story today isn't about Lazarus but rather the widow of Nain's son. We don't know this man's name- and while naming is important- perhaps the most important part of the scripture is the creative transformation possible when God intervenes.

God intervening raises its own set of issues in terms of why God seems to have intervened in these two situations and not in all the countless others you and I can think of. Sometimes, in the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, Bad Things Happen to Good People. Most of us, I imagine, have lost someone we love to death – and heard the platitudes that are well meaning but ultimately fall short when we are grieving. Telling me that my mother is in a better place isn't much help when I want her here and now. Yes, I know that she has been reunited with God and with my Dad, but I still want her here and now. Life is uncertain and there's much that we simply can't control.

So why these two stories about someone who was dead who was raised to life- one by the prophet Elijah and one by Jesus. What lessons are we to take from these stories when our loved ones haven't been raised to life again?

Notice that both stories involve compassion. Definitions vary. The word compassion used in our reading is also translated as “his heart broke” or “he felt pity for her” when speaking about how Jesus responded when he saw the funeral procession. So compassion indicates that Jesus related

to the scene he witnessed. He was connected to those events even as he had no prior knowledge of this widow or her deceased son.

Compassion is also evidenced by the prophet Elijah for the widow of Zarephath who thought that things were looking up when the grain and oil had miraculously multiplied so that what once was a pitiful last meal now becomes the source of ongoing life. And then- *bang*- her son became so ill that “there was no breath left in him.” From thanksgiving to sorrow. Sudden reversal with no explanation of why her son had no breath in him.

Elijah takes the son, carries him upstairs to the bed and lies down upon the child. Elijah calls out to God for help. Some have said Elijah’s laying down on top of the child three times is an early form of CPR! Whether that’s true or not, the child revives and the widow recognizes Elijah as a man of God and the word of the Lord in his mouth is true.

Two readings today, then, that reverse death and bring to life one that is of greatest importance to the parent. In both stories, the women were widows and had just one son left who has now died. In ancient times, women without men to care for them had the choice of prostitution or begging with a very few exceptions. There is a reason that God told the Israelites to care for the widows and orphans. There is a reason we are told to care for one another.

Jesus healed the sick. Jesus helped to restore outcasts and sinners to society. These two stories involve reuniting a widow with her community through the bringing back to life of a son.

Through Elijah’s actions- both the multiplying of grain and oil as well as the revitalization of her son- the widow recognizes Elijah as a prophet who speaks God’s word. And God’s word is truth. God’s truth that we are to care for the widow and orphan means that they are part of our community. Their lives which seemed so short and bitter before Elijah’s arrival has been transformed into one of continual blessing. Not without its rocky parts but a life where grain and oil are sufficient and where family is reunited to care for each other and where the widow and her son are once again eligible to be part of the larger community.

And in parallels to the story in First Kings, Jesus acts to restore a widow and her son to their rightful place in their community. He transforms, by the simple words “Young man, I say to you, rise.” And he did. And the people who were with the widow on her way to the cemetery are amazed and glorified God. The people are brought back to their faith through the work of Jesus.

R. Alan Culpepper, Dean of the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, says that if Jesus had seen the funeral procession, realized the dead man was the widow’s only son, and done nothing, it would have negated all the other miracles, healings and actions that Jesus took. If Jesus had ignored the commandment to care for the widow and orphan, then what would he mean to you and me?

While I suspect if Jesus had ignored the need of the widow, the story would not be in our Bible, the point that the action of Jesus helps us see how much Jesus cared for those in need is valid. And if Jesus took time away from whatever other mission he was on to number one see the

funeral procession and number two act to restore the son to life so that both could be restored to their community, then we can take comfort that Jesus sees our needs.

This does not mean that Jesus will always intervene or intervene in ways that we would like. It does mean that Jesus is with us as we face the many variables of this life. Whatever we face, and perhaps most importantly when bad things do happen to good people, we can rest assured that the last words in the Gospel of Matthew are true: And remember, I am with you to the end of the age.

What is our part in these stories? We can certainly listen and say “that’s nice” and move on. Or we can think about where we need compassion for others in our communities. The situations may or may not be similar. Underlying both stories are situations of someone being disconnected from their community – an outcast either literally or figuratively. Someone who has lost his or her way, perhaps, and doesn’t hear or see the Word of God as having relevance to their lives. We, too, can walk on past a funeral procession- again both literal and metaphorical- and do nothing. Or we can be alert to someone who is hurting and can use a smile or a helping hand or an offer of a meal.

Rev. David Grant Smith says that “One could suggest from this story that compassion is a quality which calls us to become partners with God in effecting creative transformation in our world...Furthermore, the idea that God remains present with us in and through the worst moments of our lives also provides a model for the way that we as people of faith can be present to one another in life’s difficult times.”¹

Be alert to what is going on around you. Look for situations where you can offer a helping hand to someone in need. It doesn’t have to be the laying on of hands for healing. It can be as simple as a “please” or “thank you” to a store clerk who rarely gets little appreciation for a tough job. It can be opening the door for someone with a walker as it is difficult to navigate everything all at once. Help those who are struggling to fit in be brought into the circle and made one with other followers of Jesus. Be a friend to one who feels friendless.

The ways to speak the truth as a man or woman of God are endless. You are a prophet who can speak and be the truth that brings life to one who believes him- or her-self dead. You do not do this on your own. God is with us now and forever. God is calling each of us to be the one whom God created us to be. And we can be that best when we have compassion for one another. **Amen.**

¹ <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearc/2013-06-09/proper-5> (June 8, 2013)