



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Glimmers of Resurrection

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 5, 2016
The Third Sunday After Pentecost—Based on 1 Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17*

Two poignant stories today: The first, of the great prophet Elijah bringing a pagan widow's son back to life. The second, taking place about 800 years later, of Jesus bringing a Gentile widow's son back to life.

These stories are poignant because most of us know the grief we feel when someone close to us dies. Some of us have even lost a son or daughter to death. Losing a child is surely one of the deepest pains one can have to bear in this life. Often we see that grief in a public way on the news.

From today's New York Times Special Report: In Chicago over Memorial Day weekend: 64 shot, 6 fatally—one of those a 15-year-old girl, one a 25-year-old man just sitting in his locked car, his mother frantically trying to open the door to save him. This past Memorial Day, we remembered those who've given their lives in service to our country; all of those were someone's child. We've seen the father holding his child drowned in an attempt to escape Syria. We've seen the mother holding her emaciated child, who is dying of starvation.

These stories of Elijah and Jesus we hear today may raise uncomfortable questions, sometimes with an edge of anger: Why were these raised from the dead, but not my child? Why was this person healed, but not the one I loved?

We may be tempted to dismiss these stories as ancient fables, of questionable truth, not really relevant to us today. Yes, these stories were written more than 2,000 years ago. Yes, they do quote exact dialog, long before there were ways of recording such detail—no iPhones or body cameras then. Did this really happen? Did it happen exactly that way?

These are understandable questions, but they miss the point. These stories are written to convey truths “too great to be contained by facts.” The focus of these stories is ultimately not death, or even miracles. When we look at the bigger picture, we find these stories are about *identity*. And they have a lot to say to us today.

Both stories are about widows who lose their only sons. Even beyond the huge emotional grief of that loss is its economic implication for the widow. In those times and cultures, without a husband and with no other son to provide for her, a widow would likely be homeless, destitute. Widows' lives were among the most precarious. In the ancient world, people's children were their retirement. Restoring a widow's son may have meant the difference between survival and destitution.

Luke wanted his audience to recall the story of Elijah.

The prophet Elijah had to touch the dead boy, but Jesus, who is a far greater prophet, needs only to touch the bier on which the dead man lies. You may remember that this story immediately follows the healing of the centurion's son, which he did from a distance. Jesus does not cry out to God, as the prophet did—he has only to tell the man to rise, and the man sits up and begins to speak.

Luke is trying to show his audience, which includes us, something about the identity of Jesus, which points to the identity and very nature of God. Which then says something to us about our own identity.

One very important detail: Jesus *noticed* the widow. She did not call out to him. She did not tug on his robe. Jesus *noticed* her and immediately perceived her precarious situation. Jesus had compassion for the widow. In Greek, the word is much stronger and more graphic: more like “his guts were wrenched.”

Jesus showed compassion for all kinds of people. Jesus cared deeply for the most vulnerable in society, here a widow without children and so without means of support.

Compassion starts with noticing, with perceiving someone's situation. And then compassion goes beyond feeling into action. As followers of Jesus, as those made in the image of God, we are called to notice others, to perceive their situations. We are to be active in showing compassion, especially to those in the most precarious of circumstances.

And there's another thing we're called to do: when we experience God acting in our lives, we are to tell others about it. We are to share it, not keep it to ourselves! The idea of telling others about God acting in our lives tends to make us uncomfortable. It seemed to come naturally to Jesus' disciples, but seems harder for us to do today.

But I've noticed that when someone has experienced God acting in their lives, they are compelled to share it! And share it they do, with their face shining, with great joy.

It can be a temptation, when seeing the many things that seem to be going in the wrong direction in our country and in the world, to wonder if God has deserted us, if God isn't paying attention, if God doesn't care. None of these is the case!

These stories encourage us to look for how God is intervening in our lives. Where do you notice God acting in your life? In the world?

I'll give you a hint: wherever you see life and health and goodness, you are seeing glimmers of resurrection. You are seeing God acting in someone's life. You are seeing God acting in the world.

Strangely, someone asked me out of the blue on Friday if I believed in miracles. This was someone who did not know our readings for today, and who did not know I was wrestling with these readings in preparation for preaching today. I answered: Yes, I do believe in miracles. Have you seen any? Yes, I have. Was that before or after you were ordained? Both.

Here's what I've seen:

I've seen someone very ill, frightened, in the depths of despair, actually looking "like death warmed over." I saw someone wrestling honestly at finding himself face to face with death. I saw his wife, using her considerable strength, courage, humor—and compassion—to care for and to advocate for her husband. She had the courage to speak words of truth in love to him. He was given the grace to hear those words, to take them deeply into himself, where they took root. Wrestling through the dark hours of the night, he emerged into the light of gratitude and blessedness. He was still physically just as ill, but his despair had been transformed into gratitude for his life, his family. He was newly able to see and appreciate the many blessings of his life. Here was a person who, physically and spiritually, had entered the valley of the shadow of death. And now he was radiantly alive.

Who touched his bier?

I saw another person who found herself bitterly resentful over a turn of events in her family. Her closest relationship in the world, that with her only child, threatened to dissolve. She had a conversation with a trusted friend. The friend listened and suggested she initiate a conversation. The woman was given grace to hear her friend's words, to take them deeply into herself, to act on them. Months later, she reported with great joy, their broken relationship had been restored to wholeness. Challenges remained, but new life and joy had been born into her family. Who touched her bier?

Who reaches out to us when we're dead? Who is bringing new life? Who is bringing healing to us, to our broken world? Who dares to work through us imperfect human beings?

God, make us channels of your peace. God, make us channels of your healing.

Amen.