# SERMON SERIES: EMPIRE’S END

# “Breaking The Grip Of The Grave”

## *Luke 7:11-17 (The Message)*

***True story: a South Carolina funeral home is planning to open a coffee house on its premises. It will be stocked with Starbucks coffee and offer wifi, as well as a fireplace and a television. The funeral home's owner says that he hopes it’ll help mourners "get their minds off what’s going on.''***

***A local news magazine welcomed people to submit a name for this new café.***

***Some of the proposed names that received an Honorable Mention include “The Last Cup,” “Perkatory,” “Wake Up And Smell The Coffee,” “Bean Nice Knowing You,” and “The Grim Roaster.” The third place award went to the name “Latte For Your Own Funeral.” The second place award went to the name “Still Above Grounds Café.” And the winner, whose name will adorn the new coffee house: “Time To Meet Your Mocha.”***

Despite the humor of the name contest, there’s a deeper reality at work here, expressed in the words of the funeral home owner: he hopes to “get their minds off what’s going on.” We have a tendency to deny the hard truths of life, especially our own mortality. We’ll take advantage of any shortcut or diversion to avoid facing those difficult moments in life. But death isn’t something we can shortcut or avoid. It’s a hard, unflinching reality that we all need to address.

***Death and dying have taken on a remote, clinical aspect in our society. Bodies are taken from hospitals or homes by professionals, who transport them to other professionals, who prepare the bodies for burial. Professionals preside over the funerary rites, and professionals see to it that the grave is secured. Professionals help us dispose of property and possessions, and professionals counsel us through our grief.***

***Some of you may still remember a time when you attended a wake for the bereaved: sitting in the same room with the body of the deceased, providing comfort and support for the survivors.*** Generations ago, more people died in their homes than in hospitals; therefore, family members were constantly present and family members did the majority of preparation of the body for burial. Death and dying, while never pleasant, was more of a hands-on affair. Today we’ve exchanged the uncomfortable closeness of death for a safer, more sterile distance from it.

But death and dying weren’t things that Jesus shied away from. In fact, one of the empires of this world that he came to challenge and transform was that of death. Jesus came to help us break the grip of the grave.

Today’s the third message in our Lenten sermon series entitled “Empire’s End.” We’re using this series to explore different events in the life of Jesus that show us how he came into the world to set people free. Jesus brought a revolution against the systems and structures of our world that kept people in bondage—empires that kept them oppressed, broken and hopeless.

The first Sunday we looked at how John the Baptist was a prelude to the things that Jesus would say and do in his ministry. Last week we explored the first empire that Jesus confronted—that of Satan himself. We talked about how the early church saw and understood Jesus to be “Christus Victor”—“Christ the Victor”—the one who had disarmed and defeated Satan by reversing the curse of sin through his death on the cross. We said that the thing Satan used to defeat Jesus—a Roman cross—was the very thing that God used to defeat Satan.

So with Satan disarmed and made vulnerable, the next empire Jesus faced down was the specter of death, the great equalizer of us all. Turn with me to our Scripture reading for today, Luke 7:11-17.

Immediately preceding this passage, Jesus had been approached by the local Jewish elders and asked to heal the servant of a Roman centurion. However, the centurion sent a messenger to tell Jesus that he didn’t need to come to his house, but since Jesus was a man of authority, all he needed to do was give the command for healing. Let’s pick up in verse 11: *Not long after that, Jesus went to the village Nain. His disciples were with him, along with quite a large crowd. As they approached the village gate, they met a funeral procession—a woman’s only son was being carried out for burial. And the mother was a widow. When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, “Don’t cry.” Then he went over and touched the coffin. The pallbearers stopped. He said, “Young man, I tell you: Get up.” The dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother.*

*They all realized they were in a place of holy mystery, that God was at work among them. They were quietly worshipful—and then noisily grateful, calling out among themselves, “God is back, looking to the needs of his people!” The news of Jesus spread all through the country.*

The village of Nain lies some six miles south of Nazareth where Jesus grew up. Its name means “charming.” Whenever I hear a town referred to as “charming” I immediately think of little European villages nestled in quiet valleys, rich with history.

***When Brett and I traveled to the Czech Republic in 2010, we got to visit a town called Cesky Krumlov, sometimes referred to as the most beautiful town in Eastern Europe. After crossing beneath a giant archway, above which sits the brooding castle, and over the river, you walk onto cobbled streets dating back centuries. Narrow alleys wind among ancient walls, buildings, gardens and fountains. At the center of the town sits a huge cathedral. Walking through the streets, smelling the food and feeling the sense of history all around you, it’s like being in a fairy-tale-come-to-life. “Charming” is an appropriate way to describe it.***

As Jesus approached the charming little village of Nain he encountered something not-so-charming: a funeral procession. In those days it was customary for the funeral procession to walk from the home of the deceased to the burial grounds outside the village. ***We do the same thing today, only our processions are in cars from the church or funeral home to the cemetery.*** Then Luke draws our attention to the real problem in this scene: *a woman’s only son was being carried out for burial. And the mother was a widow.*

In first-century AD Israel, women had very little—if any—status. They were often seen only as property and had no public say in the events of a patriarchal society. They were fully dependent on husbands or sons to provide for them. And therein lies the problem in this Scripture: this woman was a widow, so she no longer had a husband. In such a situation, it would’ve been up to her oldest son to take on the responsibility of caring for her. But tragedy had struck this woman’s household once again. Her son—her only son—had died. She had no other children and no husband. There was no one to take care of her and provide for her; she had absolutely no place left in society.

*When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, “Don’t cry.” Then he went over and touched the coffin. The pallbearers stopped.* To tell a mourner not to cry is like telling the wind not to blow. It’s just going to happen, one way or another. At a glance we might be tempted to think Jesus wasn’t a very good grief counselor, telling this poor woman not to cry. But Luke has already told us how Jesus reacted to her situation. He was grieving *for her*. His instruction of “Don’t cry” doesn’t reveal a lack of compassion, but reminds us that the good news of the kingdom will turn grief into joy. Jesus said in Luke 6:21, “*God blesses you who weep now, for in due time you will laugh.”*

Jesus stopped the funeral procession, touched the coffin, and *said, “Young man, I tell you: Get up.” The dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother.* This event foreshadows something similar that happened when Jesus was crucified. The nineteenth chapter of the gospel of John records the scene: *Standing near the cross were Jesus’ mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, “Dear woman, here is your son.” And he said to this disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from then on this disciple took her into his home.* Before dying, Jesus made sure his mother was “presented” to someone who could care for her.

One aspect of life that we all must deal with is death. We can avoid talking about it and put it off as long as possible, but there comes a time when we must face our own mortality. The big question is *how* do we face it?

So far in this series we’ve noted that Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan, to remove the curse of sin of Adam, and to triumph over evil. The second great empire that existed as a result of human sinfulness was death. Jesus had to confront the empire of death and overcome it so that we need fear it no longer.

Because of Christ's victory, God assures us in his Word that the separation in death is not permanent for believers in Christ. For one day there will be a reunion of believing loved ones in heaven, never to be separated again. ***In the Old Testament, it’s often repeated that a saint who died was* “gathered to his people.” *This was said of Abraham, Isaac, Aaron and Moses. This doesn’t mean they were laid to rest* alongside *their people because Moses was not. It means their souls and spirits were reunited in that place called Paradise.***

Because of the victory of Christ, death is merely a departure for home, and a means of being in the presence of the Lord perfectly and eternally. In 2nd Timothy 4:6, at the end of his life, Paul wrote that *the time of my departure is at hand*. ***The Greek word here for “departure” is a nautical term used of a ship which pulls up its anchor and sets sail. It was used in a military sense: of an army breaking camp to move on. And it was also used when talking about freeing someone from their chains. Therefore, when we’re in Christ—because of his triumph over the empire of death—we’re not cast off when we die. We don’t just cease to exist or become part of some nebulous great “universal consciousness.” We pull up anchor and set sail. We break camp and move on. The chains of this earthly body are broken and we’re set free. Death for the believer is not a venture into the unknown, or a strange or alien atmosphere: it’s like going home.***

This is why when we conduct a funeral service for a Christian we sometimes call it a “celebration of life,” not only for the physical life that has been lived, but for the eternal life they have received. ***In the United Methodist Book of Worship it’s called “A Service of Death and Resurrection.”*** We recognize the physical death and separation that has occurred but we don’t stop there. We celebrate the resurrection of the dead to new life. As Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 15:20-22, …*Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. …just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.* ***Death is not extinguishing the light from the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.***

Jesus Christ had to challenge and achieve victory over death so that death does not have the final word. He had to make a way through the most feared aspect of our human experience. Jesus not only showed his mastery over death by raising the widow’s son―or even Lazarus. He showed his total mastery over death by his own resurrection. And because of that, we don’t have to fear death. Jesus has broken the grip of the grave so that it no longer has dominion over us.

*Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1st Corinthians 15:54-57).

Amen.