

Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. Do any of you recognize those? According to psychologists, those are the five stages of grieving. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was the one who came up with them back in the 60s. Every person is different, but in general, they say this is how we human beings deal with death – either that of a loved one or our own impending death. We *deny* the reality of it. We get *angry* about it. We *bargain* to try to change the situation. We sink into *depression*. Ultimately, the goal of psychologists is to lead us to *accept* the reality of death.

If there's one thing that process teaches us, it's this: We are ultimately helpless in the face of death. Think about it. You can *deny* it all you want, but that won't change the facts. You can get *angry* at people, or death, or even God, but that won't bring anyone back from the dead. And no amount of *bargaining* has ever saved anyone from it either. According to psychologists, the best we can do is accept death.

But not according to our Savior. This morning, we see Jesus coming face to face with death for the first time recorded in the gospels. And when he did, he didn't just accept the reality of death. He changed the reality of death. God recorded these words for us to help us trust that he's done the same thing for all who believe in him: He hasn't left us helplessly dealing with death...he's dealt with death for us. Let's follow Jesus on the road to a village called Nain and see how Jesus deals with death... 1) With perfect compassion, and 2) with merciless might.

¹¹ Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don't cry.”

¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

II. With perfect compassion

You can picture the scene, can't you? Jesus is in full swing in his ministry in Galilee. He's been traveling and teaching and performing miracles and has developed quite the following. He just got done healing the centurion's servant in Capernaum. When he leaves that city, it's almost like a parade – Jesus at the head of an excited crowd of followers on the way to a village called Nain.

But as they approach the city, they meet a very different kind of procession. This one has at its head a dead body carried on a **bier**, a platform. And the people following are weeping and wailing. In particular, one woman. Luke tells us her tragic story. This wasn't her first trip to a tomb outside of town. Not long before, she had walked behind her husband's body as they carried him to his grave. But at least then she had her son's shoulder to cry on. Now, it's that same son whose body she's burying. A **young man**, Luke tells us, cut down in the prime of life. Her **only son**, Luke tells us – all the family she had left.

How do you think this woman saw God at this moment? Luke doesn't tell us what stage of grieving she's in. But losing your whole family and left all alone...you can imagine how that kind of suffering might test even the strongest of believers. I wonder if she felt anger – how could God allow this to happen? Maybe even despair – thinking it wasn't just her son and husband who had left her, God must have, too.

Maybe you can relate. Burying a loved one before their time. Mourning the death of a spouse and being left all alone. It's the kind of situation that leaves you wrestling with all sorts of questions about God and his love and his plans for you.

Luke doesn't tell us how this woman saw God at this moment. But he tells us what matters most: How God saw her at this moment. **When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her.** Jesus' heart was breaking for her. And I suppose ours would be, too, if we had been there...but Jesus' heart was breaking in a way ours never can.

Luke calls him **the Lord** here. That's no accident. The man at the head of the procession on the way to Nain that day is God. He was there in the beginning when he made a perfect world without death. He was there walking and talking with Adam and Eve in perfect life that was supposed to go on forever. And he was there when they sinned against him. He was the One who said, *"Because you've done this...from dust you are, and to dust you shall return."*

But here we learn that those words brought God no pleasure. They broke his heart. It broke Jesus' heart to see what pain and misery sin had brought to this widow. It breaks his heart still to see what pain and misery our sin brings into our life, including death.

But Jesus has another perspective on death. Not just God's, but ours. Human like us, he's been there. By this time, he's probably already wept at the funeral of his step-dad, Joseph. Soon, he'd weep at his friend Lazarus' tomb. He'd be on his knees in Gethsemane as his own death loomed, and then on the cross breathing his last. He knows the pain of death by experience.

And so he's perfectly equipped to comfort us when we're hurting. **When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, "Don't cry."** She might have felt God was far off, but God was right there to comfort her. We might feel like God has left us to ourselves, but he hasn't. No, God left Jesus to himself on the cross with our sins – giving him the punishment we deserved for them. God left Jesus to himself with our sins to forgive us and be with us always. Especially in times of death, he's with us to comfort us in his word.

See how Jesus deals with death? With perfect compassion.

II. With merciless might

But we need more than that, don't we? After all, we've been there – either comforting or being comforted at a funeral. And as much as we appreciate the presence of people we love, there's a certain helplessness to it all, isn't there? Because no matter how many kind words are spoken, it doesn't change the fact that the person who died isn't coming home.

Maybe Jesus' words seemed that way at first, too. **Don't cry**, he told the woman. Spoken by anyone else, those would have been empty words. Cruel, even! Don't cry? This widow had a perfectly good reason to be crying! But this was **the Lord** speaking. His words are never empty. He had the power to take away the cause of her tears.

Jesus **went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still** in surprise. Normally Jews would never come that close to a dead body for fear of becoming unclean. Then he did something more surprising: He spoke to the dead man as if he were still alive. Jesus **said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!”** And then the dead man *was* alive. **The dead man sat up and began to talk.** Think of the power there! Jesus says the word, and instantly the synapses in his brain begin firing, and his heart begins beating, and this once dead man is so alive he starts talking – as if he’s picking up the last conversation he was having without missing a beat.

The Lord of life met death in Nain, and death didn’t stand a chance. With a word, Jesus sent death packing and **gave the boy back to his mother.** See how Jesus deals with death? With merciless might.

Did you notice how the people responded? **They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.”** They didn’t seem to get that Jesus was more than a prophet...he was their Savior. But they were right in saying, “God has come to help his people.” More right than they even realized.

Jesus is God, and he came to help his people. But not just by temporarily undoing the death of a few people in Palestine. He came into this world as one of us to permanently break death’s hold on all of us. It broke God’s heart to see what our sin had earned us – death now and forever in hell. And since we were helpless to save ourselves, he came to save us from both. And so the Lord of life met death again. This time it was his own, on the cross. The death we deserved under God’s punishment for all of our sins. One death that *paid* for all of our sins. And with the world’s sins paid for, death lost its power. The Lord of life sent death packing for all of us when he rose from the dead on the third day. He has changed the reality of death for all who believe in him: It is the soul’s entrance into heaven’s glory, while the body awaits the resurrection on the Last Day.

You know this. But it can be hard to hold onto, can’t it? Maybe if we had been there to see him raise this young man in Nain, maybe if we had been there to see Jesus rise, we’d trust this truth more firmly. But we haven’t seen Jesus’ power over death with our eyes; we’ve just seen death’s power over us. So it’s not always easy trust. We’ve all experienced it, haven’t we? Whether at the funeral of a loved one, or contemplating our own death, our faith can be like a roller coaster – at one moment fully trusting Jesus’ promise, and the next nagging doubts rise in our minds.

But God is still coming to help his people. The words of Jesus were powerful enough to send death packing that day in Nain. They’re still powerful to send our doubts packing. His promises are all over the pages of scripture: God’s words of comfort we share with each other in times of death are not empty words! They are Spirit and life, and the Spirit uses them to keep us trusting in Jesus.

Until we do see with our eyes – when God comes to help his people on the Last Day. When he will send death packing forever. When the Jesus who said, **“Get up!”** and raised a boy in Nain will say, **“Get up!”** and raise all the dead. When the Jesus who **gave the boy back to his mother** will permanently give back to us all of our believing loved ones who have died. When the Jesus who said, **“Don’t cry,”** to a grieving widow will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We still grieve. But we don’t need 5 stages to deal with death. We have something far better: A compassionate Savior who comforts us. A mighty Savior who dealt with death for us. There’s no need for denial, or anger, or bargaining. No need to even accept death as the final reality. Because in Christ, it isn’t. In Christ, we beat death. Amen.