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Jesus Provides Guidance as We Deal with Death

Death is a reality all people face including Christians. Sometimes death is a blessed relief after a long life or a painful sickness. Often, however, death is a shocking intruder; it arrives unexpected and unwanted. Jesus has power over death and the Gospel for today takes us to Jesus who knows how to deal with death and with us as we grieve because of death.

First Reading

Lamentations 3:22-33

The Lord has compassion for people.

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Even at times of death Jesus is near us.

Gospel

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

Jesus deals with a family mourning a daughter.

Sermon

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

Introduction – There is not a person in this church—except maybe for the littlest children—who has not had to deal with the death of someone they love. Sometimes we could prepare ourselves; sometimes we couldn't. Sometimes we expected death, sometimes we didn't. Sometimes we considered death a blessed relief; sometimes we considered it a terrible tragedy. Sometimes the death of someone we loved put a smile in our hearts but sometimes it was like a punch in the gut.

We've all had to deal with death. There are things to do before death: Arrange for someone to sit at the bedside, call the pastor to come, confer with the medical staff. There are things to do after death: Choose a funeral director, decide about an autopsy, locate the cemetery plot, plan the funeral service. Those are the easy parts of dealing with death. We also have to deal with our emotions. Saying good-bye is hard even if we prayed that someone would die. Life will be different without that familiar face. When death is sudden and unexpected, emotions go on overload. The shock is indescribable. We feel almost numb. I've seen all those emotions as a pastor and I've felt them as a son and as a father. Dealing with the death of someone we love is about the hardest thing to do in life.

I really don't mean to be awakening unhappy memories this morning, but the Gospel for today takes us to the subject of death. It tells us the story of a father and his twelve-year old daughter. We don't know if there was an accident or a disease involved, but this dad knew his little girl was dying and then he knew that she had died. But the story doesn't really focus on the dad or his daughter; it's not about his grief or how she slipped away. The center of attention here is on Jesus. And the focus on Jesus is really not his power over death. What we see here is how Jesus deals with people who have to deal with death. What we see here isn't only his power—that's a given. What we really see is Jesus' compassion.

Sooner or later we all will die and Jesus has plenty to say about the death we can all expect. But today Jesus is talking about the death of other people, people we know and love, people we miss and mourn. And the Gospel shows us this truth:

Jesus Helps Us Deal with Death

His name was Jairus. He was a layman in the city of Capernaum and he served as an elder at the local synagogue. His 12 year old daughter was dying. Considering his status in the city, he certainly sought out the best medical services available. No hope. All at once he heard that Jesus was in town. He knew Jesus' reputation; everybody in Capernaum knew about Jesus since Capernaum was Jesus' base of operations. So Jairus went to find him. There was a crowd; there always was. So Jairus wormed his way through the bodies. **When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live. So Jesus went with him.** No questions, no comments. Jairus asked and Jesus went with him.

That's what Jesus does. When we're dealing with the death of someone we love, Jesus is there. Jesus is always there. Not in person, obviously. We can't look into his eyes or touch his hand. But he's as close to us as our Bibles. That's where Jesus speaks to us, in his Word. We might look for answers on our own; we might ask a friend or our pastor to help us find the fitting passages. We might open our hymnals because Jesus' Word is there, too. Wherever Jesus' Word is there is always comfort and direction and love. Jesus will always help us deal with death.

But Jesus can't help us if we don't go looking for him. It happens way too often that people face death and try to deal with it on their own. Someone they love dies and they lose their emotional balance; they don't know where to turn; they can't turn off the tears. And then they get angry with God: "Where is God when I need him." Trouble is, they didn't look for him. Jairus did. He waded through the crowds, he fell at his feet knowing Jesus' power, he begged for help trusting Jesus' compassion. He remembered what the Scriptures taught about the touch of the hand of God. Jairus went looking for Jesus with a heart of faith and Jesus was right there to help. Remember that when you have to deal with death. Jesus is there.

The Gospel for today omits an event that took place right at this point. A woman who had lived with a hemorrhaging wound approached Jesus and he stopped to help. If I were Jairus, this would have driven me crazy. I would have said, "Jesus, I need you now." We feel the same sometimes. We come begging for help and Jesus seems to dally and take his time. The truth is that Jesus knows; he has every situation in firm grasp. Stopping to help this bleeder wasn't going to change the situation at Jairus' home. He knows the timetable at our homes and in our hearts, too. Jesus sets his own timetable for helping us deal with death.

But at that point, the timetable seemed to be very wrong. **While Jesus was still speaking to the bleeder, some people came from Jairus' house. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"** Jairus' heart must have broken right then and there. Too late. The last hope was gone. We know the feeling. The doctor shrugs his shoulders and lifts his hands. The eyes are closed and the breathing stops. The house is empty and that familiar voice is gone. The hand we held isn't there. The loneliness begins and the heartache doesn't stop. That's the way it goes; that's the way it always goes with everyone. But Jesus doesn't care about the way it always goes. He didn't in today's Gospel. Jesus simply set the news aside; he ignored it. **Don't be afraid**, he told Jairus. **Just believe.** Jesus has a way of surprising us when we have to deal with death. What we expect doesn't always happen. The way life goes for others doesn't go the same way for us. Life with Jesus changes things even at times of death.

So Jesus arrived at Jairus house and **saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.** This was the custom back then; this was the social side of dying. Lutherans don't make a commotion; it's not our thing. We take casseroles to the house; we make ham sandwiches and potato salad for the funeral lunch. We send flowers and give memorial gifts. Those are our customs. But Jesus wasn't interested in customs; Jesus saw that they just got in the way of the real issue. **He went in and said to them, Why all this commotion and wailing? This child is not dead, but asleep.** The criers and wailers laughed at him, but Jesus was taking them straight to the issue. This young girl has died; her heart isn't beating. That's the issue here and now. You may be good neighbors with your crying and wailing and your casseroles and flowers, but you are missing the point. The center of our attention when someone dies is death. And the bullseye is what death means to a child of God. **This child is not dead, but asleep,** Jesus said. For us, death is never the end. At the instant of

death, the soul of the believer is carried to the arms of Jesus in heaven. The body we bury is only half the person we loved, and the half we place in the ground awaits the final resurrection at the end of time. This is the issue, this is the main point, this is the center of attention. The funeral industry has introduced a new term for funerals. They call it “A Celebration of Life.” The celebration of life means to focus on all the good memories we have of a person, and we cover the walls with pictures and tell funny stories. This is all good and right and it’s a fine custom. But Jesus helps us deal with death by re-focusing our attention to the real issue: the passing of a Christian is really a celebration of death! Even in our heartache we can smile through our tears. This person, whether young or old, whether sick or healthy, whether needed or not, this loved one is now with Jesus. And there is nothing better than that—not for them and nor for us.

So this story from Jesus’ ministry has a happy ending, actually happier than anything we’ve experienced. **After Jesus put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, *Talitha koum!* (which means “Little girl, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around. He told them to give her something to eat.** We hear about miracles. The doctor offers no hope and yet someone recovers. But these miracles don’t often happen, and most of the time we deal with what is more natural: Someone we love dies. But there was more than a miracle in Jairus’ house on this day. There was also a message here. With this miracle our Lord Jesus is proclaiming that he is the Son of God who has power over life and death. The girl’s parents **were astonished** but they would be more astonished when they listened and learned from Jesus. They would learn, as we have learned, that Jesus came to earth to do more than make dead people walk and talk and eat again. Jesus came to earth to forgive the sins which we think and speak and do. He came to dry tears but he also came to remove guilt. He came to win eternal life for people like us who deserve eternal death. He gained heaven and saved us from hell. To do this, he died and he was as dead as Jairus’ daughter. But just as Jesus raised her to life, so he raised himself to life and because he lives, we will also live. No grave, no tomb, no urn can keep us in. Jesus helps us deal with death by proving that he has destroyed death forever.

Death always hurts. The death of someone we love hurts even more. I know it from my own experience and so do you. But Jesus helps us deal with death. Just ask Jairus. Jesus is always there for us; we only need to ask. Jairus knew. Jesus sometimes delays but always for a good purpose. Jairus knew. Jesus invites us to believe the impossible. Jairus knew. Jesus leads us to focus on the reality of death and what it means for believers. Jairus knew. Jesus proclaims to us that he has power over death. Jairus knew. Jesus helped Jairus deal with death and Jesus does the same for us. Amen.

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