

- In March 2014, 79-year-old Walter Williams woke up in a body bag just as he was about to be embalmed. Doctors may have been confused because his pacemaker had shut off.
- In the Philippines, a 3-year-old girl woke up in a coffin at a church as the family moved the lid to arrange the body. She had a severe fever and was merely in a coma.
- In Germany, a funeral director got the shock of his life when the elderly woman he was preparing for burial suddenly sat up in her coffin and asked where she was. After he woke up from passing out, he called paramedics who discovered that she did, in fact, have a pulse. She would die for real a few days later.

The gospels have similar stories of funerals getting broken up, except in those cases it's not an oversight of the deceased's family or a doctor's incompetence. The dead do, indeed, sit up but it's always the result of the presence of Jesus.

The story of the raising of the widow's son at Nain is a case in point. It shows us that this kind of shocking reversal isn't just an odd occurrence; it's a pattern that reaches back into Israel's history and one that looks forward to the future.

Nain was a small town in the Galilee region. As Jesus and his disciples arrived with a large crowd in tow, a funeral procession was heading out of the gate. A widow's son had died, which was a double tragedy. Not only would this woman have been grieving deeply over the loss of her only son, the funeral procession also meant that her own future was likely on the way out as well, since she would have no one to support her (vv. 11-13).

The procession was large because people normally dropped whatever they were doing to follow along (v. 12). Fascination with death was a Jewish thing, too, and funeral rites in ancient Israel followed very strict protocols. According to custom, the bereaved mother would walk in front of the bier (a stretcher bearing the deceased) and no one but the closest family members would have touched the body as it was prepared for burial. Those in the crowd knew that just touching the bier would expose a person to a day's worth of ritual uncleanness, while touching the body would make you unclean for a week. The grieving mother, walking ahead of her dead son, was likely alone because she had been the one to wash and prepare the body for burial.

When Jesus saw her, "he had compassion for her" (v. 13). "Do not weep," he said, and then, shockingly, he touched the bier, exposing himself to the uncleanness of death. But in this case, everything goes backwards. It's Jesus life force that transfers to the corpse. "Young man, I say to you, rise!" commanded Jesus, and "the dead man sat up and began to speak" (vv. 14-15).

No doubt a few people passed out. Some certainly screamed while others might have called the paramedics if there were any. Luke tells us, however, that, "Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people.'" While this was certainly an unusual event, the people of Nain (and, by extension, Luke's first readers) also knew that it wasn't unprecedented. Immediately, they would have remembered the story of Elijah raising the dead son of the widow in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16) and would recognize Jesus as a similarly great prophet. As Elijah raised the widow's son and "gave him to his mother" (1 Kings 17:23), so Jesus brought the widow of Nain's son back to life and "gave him to his mother" (v. 15). Death is thwarted, the family repaired, life restored, and new hope given.

Raising the dead was a prophetic sign that God's kingdom was breaking in on the world. When the dead regularly sit up, something new is happening! The sign of the prophet Elijah was becoming a sign for the present age and the age to come. But it was still not a complete sign. The dead whom Jesus raised were, in fact, merely resuscitated. They would die again even after having been given a new shot at life. Real resurrection - renewed, eternal bodies resurrected in God's new world - is something quite different. Many Jews believed that the resurrection would happen at the end of the age when God's kingdom came in its fullness. The healing of the widow's son pointed to that future, but it would take an even greater miracle to bring it about.

Luke wants us to read this story not only in light of Elijah, but also in light of another story at the end of the gospel about a dead son and a grieving, widowed mother. In this case, though, the funeral would take place with the body laid in a tomb, covered in spices, and left to rot along with her hopes and dreams and those of the people that had followed him.

Jesus was dead when the Romans executed him; but then the unthinkable happened: an empty tomb, a resurrected body, an eternal life. The resurrection to which the miracles pointed had actually happened, but in the middle of time and not at the end as they had expected: God's kingdom arrived, death dealt a mortal blow, and resurrection made the promise for everyone.

From the widow of Zarephath to the widow of Nain to the widow Mary from Nazareth, these stories remind us that death is something about which we need neither be fearful nor fascinated. Its power is greatly exaggerated because its ultimate defeat has been assured. We are still confronted with it in the present, however. We get the phone call about the death of a loved one, or we get a call from the doctor telling us that we don't have long to live. We might wish that Jesus would stop the funeral procession, take away the uncleanness of death, and

give us back our loved ones or our health. We wish we could hear the bell ringing in the graveyard or see the breath come back into the little body of a child who has died. A lot of people in Jesus' own time and place wished for the same. There were many people in those other little towns in Galilee who never got the miracle.

But the story reminds us that anything short of real resurrection is just a temporary fix, a resuscitation in which death will eventually win again. We need the permanent defeat of death that was begun with the resurrection of Jesus and will be completed when he returns in power -- the day when all the dead will sit up.

The great 19th-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody, when asked to preach a funeral sermon, searched the gospels to find a funeral sermon that Jesus himself had preached. Moody later wrote, "I hunted through the four gospels trying to find one of Christ's funeral sermons, but I couldn't find any. I found he broke up every funeral he ever attended! He never preached a funeral sermon in the world. Death couldn't exist where he was. When the dead heard his voice, they sprang to life."

The gospel points us to this promise. One day, all funerals will be canceled forever. Then we will say with the apostle Paul, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?...But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57). In the meantime, we know that the risen Jesus meets us on every funeral procession, reminding us that death will not have the last word.

Merciful God, thank you for the compassion I see displayed so spontaneously in Jesus. I'm so glad that you are filled to overflowing with such compassion. Increase my faith in your love and compassion; and help me to be filled with your compassion also. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Sources:

- Dearden, Lizzie. "'Dead' three-year-old girl wakes up in coffin at her own funeral in Philippines." *The Independent (UK) Website*. July 14, 2014. independent.co.uk. Retrieved December 12, 2015.
- Fitt, Emma Moody. *Day by Day with D.L. Moody*. Moody Publishers, 1977.
- "Reports of Mark Twain's quip about his death are greatly misquoted." *This Day in Quotes Website*. May 31, 2015. thisdayinquotes.com. Retrieved December 12, 2015.

When the Dead Sit Up

Sunday, June 19, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Luke 7:11-17

The iconic American humorist and author Mark Twain (real name, Samuel Clemens) was traveling abroad in London in May of 1897 when some newspapers back home reported that he was very ill and on his deathbed. Turns out that members of the press had confused Sam Clemens with his cousin James Ross Clemens, who was also in London at the time and actually quite sick (though he would recover). To clear up the false reports, Twain wrote a letter back home that was published in the *New York Journal* in which he said with his characteristic wit, "The report of my death was an exaggeration."

Given the Victorian era's fascination with death, it might have been both a relief and a disappointment to the *Journal's* readers. The late 19th century was full of talk about death, mourning rituals and even mourning fashion for grieving ladies. The making of "death masks" or plaster impressions of the deceased's face at the time of death was a common practice. Even burial practices were getting new attention, with embalming becoming more common due to the massive casualties caused by the American Civil War.

With all that attention on death, however, a basic human problem still plagued this increasingly sophisticated and industrialized era; namely, how do you know when someone is really dead and not just *mostly* dead or even just about to recover?

To hedge their bets, Victorian-era undertakers developed casket technology that offered a way out if the deceased happened to wake up while buried 6 feet under. These "safety coffins" included innovations like a string running through a tube from inside the coffin to a bell on the surface of the grave to give newly revived former corpses the chance to ring it and have the cemetery caretaker, no doubt working the graveyard shift, dig him or her up quickly. Other inventions involved elaborate air tubes or windows where caretakers could see the face of the deceased to determine if decomposition was happening or if, on the contrary, their countenance was improving. And all God's people said, "Ewww."

None of those coffin innovations ever proved useful, but the truth is that even in our own day, with all the advancements we've made in medical science, there are still those whose reported deaths have been exaggerated: