

Ultimate Survival: The End is Not the End

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Luke 7:11-17 from The Voice of Luke

It wasn't long after this when Jesus entered a city called Nain. Again all of his disciples accompanied him, along with a huge crowd. He was coming near the gate of the city as a corpse was being carried out. This man was the only child *and support* of his widowed mother, and she was accompanied by a large funeral crowd.

As soon as the Lord saw her, he felt compassion for her.

Jesus Don't weep.

Then He came to the stretcher, and those carrying it stood still.

Jesus Young man, listen! Get up!

The dead man immediately sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother, and everyone was both shocked and jubilant. They praised God.

Funeral Crowd A tremendous prophet has arisen in our midst!
God has visited his people!

News of Jesus spread across the whole province of Judea and beyond to the surrounding regions.

Last week First Christian Church's Theologian in Residence, David Digby, and I began a new sermon series called, Ultimate Survival: Who

Lives, Who Dies, and Why. This summer we will be exploring various survival tactics and how those correspond not only to staying alive physically, but spiritually as well. What are some practices, attitudes and thought processes that not only keep us alive, but thriving, living fully and abundantly as promised by God.

Our story from Luke this morning begins at the end. It is a funeral procession. A man has died, and his mother and a large crowd are processing out of the city on the way to the place of burial. It is a sad day. I'm sure that mother loved her son dearly and it pains her greatly that she has outlived him. That is the worst fear of most parents. When things happen as they should, it is the children who bury their parents, not the other way around. And so it is that this mother processes to the city gates on her way to lay her son to rest.

Surely that is sad enough. Surely, losing a son is hard enough. But this is a story of survival, not for the son so much as for this mother. Details in biblical stories are often sparse, so if something is included, it is usually very important to the meaning of the story. Luke

tells us that this mother is a widow. The man was her only child. In this world, a woman did not have standing in society apart from her relationship to a husband or a son. Property and land passed through the males in the family. There was no Social Security or Pension Fund. This woman's husband had already died. Now her son. She had no one left upon who she could depend for her own survival. How would she get along? How would she find the resources to eat and have shelter? This was a doubly terrible day for this mother!

This seems like kind of a random story. Jesus just happened to be entering the city as the funeral procession was leaving with the corpse of this man. Jesus assessed the situation, felt compassion for this poor widow who would now live on the margins of society because she had just lost her only security, and so he told the man to "get up!" and he did! The widow might have proclaimed, "I didn't see that coming!" And she didn't. She couldn't have. Yet attitude is everything and one survival attitude is to understand that "the end is not the end." How often do we think "it's over" only to find out that there was

something just around the corner that changes the situation and makes the seemingly impossible, possible. And if we can suspend our inclination to feel defeated and give up, we just might live to see the new possibility.

One of my favorite movie quotes comes from the movie, *Shakespeare in Love*. Geoffrey Rush plays the role of a theatre owner in the days of Shakespeare in England. His theatre was just barely surviving, and in one early scene in the movie, Tom Wilkinson's character literally had this man's feet to the fire trying to get money back he had invested in this theatre. At one point, the theatre had been closed down by edict of the Queen. Once again, it looks like the end for this struggling theatre. But the theatre owner had been here before, and had developed the attitude that "the end is not the end." Trying to get his investor to calm down Geoffrey Rush assures Tom Wilkinson, "It'll all work out." Tom Wilkinson asks, "How?" And Geoffrey Rush replies matter-of-factly, "I don't know. It's a mystery." And just as those words came out of his mouth, the edict was lifted

and the theatre reopened. This is probably my favorite quote because it exudes the attitude that I think is so important to survival and abundant life. "I don't know how it will work out, but I know it will."

Now don't get the wrong impression, this is not something that was said without also doing things, whatever was in his power to make the theatre succeed. But at the point where things were out of his control, there was a trust that the universe might just align in a way to make for a positive outcome and by living into that, he was calm enough to perceive it when it came. You see, when we feel defeated and anxious, the lower parts of our brain take over and sometimes we cannot function so well and see a solution that may be right in front of us. Sometimes when we feel defeated and anxious, we tense up and our bodies and brains and spirits become rigid and more likely to brake or become incapacitated. Having the attitude that "the end is not the end" even though we don't yet see the way out can keep us calm enough to be able to assess our situation and move toward the solution or way out when it presents itself.

You may not know this, but I am lucky to have survived my twentieth year of life. That year I had at least two experiences that could have just as easily ended in my death. Like our story this morning, the way out came by the grace of God, not any great strategy or heroics on my part. As you might image, for someone that age, both involved a car. I'm just going to share one of these stories today.

Back then, I drove a 1972 baby blue Volkswagen Super Beetle. I was taking a semester away from Drake to do an internship in Council Bluffs, IA which is on I-80 as far west as you can go and still be in Iowa. On this particular night, I was driving from Council Bluffs back to Des Moines. It was dark and raining hard. Just at the time I was at a peak in the landscape - you may think of I-80 as being flat, but I found the place that is not - I hit some kind of water spot in the road and started to hydroplane. That little car started spinning around and I soon realized that I was soaring off the road, off the side, down a steep embankment. And I have to tell you, I was sure this was the end. I assumed that when I hit bottom, I would be dead.

The thing is, though, I was completely calm. I did not experience fear. I was not anxious. I was at peace. It wasn't a bad thought that this was my last moments on earth. It was okay. God surrounded me with a sense that I was not alone and that everything was alright (even if I was going to die.) My body was not stiff. My mind was at ease. My spirit was soaring. When I hit the ground my car landed on the other side of a barbed wire fence, and even though I didn't have my seatbelt fastened (that was before the law) I was completely unscathed. And indeed, the end was not the end. Of course, once I survived the fall, because I *hadn't* lost it, I had the energy to assess the situation and find my way home with the help of some gracious and kind people who saw me go off and assumed, just as I did, that I couldn't possibly have survived. How it worked out is a mystery, but here I am, alive.

Now don't get me wrong. There is no assurance that if you have the attitude that "the end is not the end" you won't die. Everyone dies. We all know that. But living with a faith and a trust that "the end is

not the end" will allow us to live more fully, to take action where we can, but then to surrender control to that power that is greater than us trusting that even if we don't know how it will work out, ultimately, it will. As a pastor, it is very common for me to hear people, at the end of their lives, or in the midst of struggling with something life-threatening, say, "I don't know what I'd do without my faith," or "I don't know how people get through these kinds of things without faith." That same trust and faith can work well for us to help us keep perspective as we face other kinds of difficult issues and situations that may threaten our mental or spiritual health. Taking on the attitude that "the end is not the end" opens us to the mystery that Jesus proclaims as a matter of faith, that "for God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Who would have thought that there was hope for a widow whose only child was on his way to the grave? That's pretty final. Yet somehow, through means we don't understand, it did. Life and hope was restored, not only to the widow, but to the crowd in the funeral

procession who discovered the power of God at work in their world. As followers of the one called The Way, The Truth and The Life, may we keep the attitude that "the end is not the end" and that for God, all things are possible. How? It's a mystery! Amen.