

***Coming Back to Life***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Psalm 16, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Luke 7:1-16***

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, verses 1-16. We're returning to the point in the Gospel we were studying several weeks ago before the Easter season, but the idea of resurrection and new life hasn't left. Let's listen to the word of God together. "When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. 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.""

When I was a kid, I wasn't one to be outside all that much. I loved a good book and playing on my computer – that probably doesn't surprise you! But back even in the early '80s, not being outside "much" meant that I still was outside doing *something* over an hour every day, delivering newspapers and hitting tennis balls off the side of our condo. Neighborhood friends would come over a couple times a week and we'd go outside to throw around a baseball or smack each other around with lightsabers. It was a good time. And there were bruised knees and grass-stained tennis shoes and the real need to wash up for supper. Even for those of us who didn't spend all of our time outdoors, we still got our hands dirty.

It's becoming more and more uncommon to see kids out in a neighborhood like we saw twenty to thirty years ago. Maybe it's because people move around so much that it's hard to make friends. Maybe it's because parents are worried about their kids being out of sight in a day and age where we don't really know our neighbors. And maybe it's just that we've lost the art of getting our hands dirty. Usually the best things in life come when we get neck-deep in them. It's fantastic when work is so fun that you lose track of time or when a conversation with good friends goes late into the night. And maybe it's an art we've lost in our society and in the church.

The story we've heard from Luke today has two major themes in it that are interconnected – getting dirty for the Kingdom of God and coming back to life. On the surface of these two stories, we might not see this being an issue. We might not understand how it affects us today. But as we dive into this story of Jesus' work, I want us to listen for the ways that it teaches us to live our lives for Christ.

As the story starts, Jesus has gone to Capernaum after preaching the Sermon on the Plain. His fame continues to grow; in fact, his fame is so widespread that people on the fringes of Judaism begin to hear about him. There's a man who's a captain of the Roman army. His title tells us that he has a hundred men or more under him. He's wealthy. He's also what the Bible calls a "godfearer." He's not a Jew, but he loves God and the Jewish people and has gone so far as to help build the synagogue, donating a lot of money and labor to the project. So he's well-connected, and he knows a lot about the Jewish faith. Now there's a servant, best person on his team, but he's sick. In fact, he's terminal. He doesn't have much time left. The centurion has heard about Jesus, and he's desperate to help this servant who's really described like a good friend. So he goes to the elders of the synagogue and asks them, "Can you talk to this Jesus for me?" And so Jesus finds out about this man through them, and Jesus leaves with them to help.

But there's a problem underlying this story, and that's the issue of ritual impurity. Jesus can't go into the centurion's home without becoming ritually unclean. Now we look at each other and say, "Ritual impurity? What's that?" But this was a huge issue to the Jews. In Jewish law, being ritually unclean meant a number of things. It meant that you couldn't attend or participate in any religious services. At best, you had to wash yourself and your clothing, and you would be considered unclean until evening. Some things, like skin diseases or bleeding disorders, would make you unclean until they went away, which meant you might always be unclean. And what was worse, virtually anyone or anything you came into physical contact with became unclean. It wasn't sinful to become ritually unclean, but many Jews saw it that way. Coming into contact with a dead body would make you unclean. Since Gentiles didn't follow Jewish laws, it was simply understood that going into a Gentile's house and touching their things would make you unclean too. And getting unclean was no small deal. Yes, you could wash it away, but being unclean was like being defiled. It was something to be avoided at all costs.

The centurion has been around Jews long enough to know something about the purity laws. He realized that he had made a huge imposition on Jesus. For Jesus to come to his house and heal his servant, he would have to become unclean. Now to us it sounds like just an inconvenience, but to a Jew, this was a huge deal. You didn't ever make yourself unclean if you didn't absolutely have to do so. So the centurion sends another set of friends to Jesus. And they tell him, "Our friend said you don't need to come. He says he's not worthy of you coming to his home. He knows if you say the word, his servant will be healed. He knows when he commands one of us to do something, we do it. He knows you can do the same." Not only does the story show that the centurion understood about Jewish laws, he also had a great deal of faith. In those times, most people thought of healing as magical. They thought that the magician had to touch the person and say the right words for them to be healed. In the Gospels, many Jews thought that they had to touch Jesus in order to be healed. But the centurion has faith that Jesus is not a traveling magician. He believes that Jesus has genuine power from God to heal, power that doesn't need a touch but just Jesus' command.

And Jesus is honestly stunned. Nobody in Israel has faith like this! The centurion realizes that God is not limited by time and space. What God desires to happen, happens. It's the kind of faith that Jesus taught to his disciples. It's the kind of faith God wants us to have. And this man with little training in faith had faith anyway. It's kind of like when you have a young child and you don't expect them to really understand who Jesus is, and then one day, they tell you out of the blue, "I love Jesus and I have Jesus in my heart." It's amazing.

But what's also amazing about this story is Jesus' willingness to go. He doesn't hesitate. He isn't worried about becoming unclean. He wasn't worried about going into a Gentile's house. He was ready to get His hands dirty so that the centurion's servant might be healed. This uncleanness that bothered all the other Jews so much, Jesus didn't care about. He cared about people more than what people thought of him.

Now for Jewish hearers who are listening to Luke's gospel for the first time, they are breathing a collective sigh of relief right now. Jesus has healed the servant, the centurion's faith in Jesus has proven true, and nobody had to get unclean doing anything. That's why I think Luke puts this story and the next one back to back. He wants to show us that Jesus not only is willing to get involved in people's lives, He wants to do it.

A few days later, Jesus is on the road again. He comes to a town called Nain, and what he sees is just tragic. A widow is headed to bury her only son. Half the town is with her. Jesus' heart breaks for her. He knows that she is in deep grief. Without her son, in her culture, she loses her whole life. Not only is he her son and her friend, he's also her only hope of a livelihood. There's nothing left for her. Jesus is filled with compassion; His heart went out to her. He tells her, "Don't cry." He's come to relieve pain, to end suffering, to set us free from sin and death. And that's exactly what he does. He tells the boy, "Get up," and he does! It's beyond belief. This man Jesus has raised someone from the dead! Not since the time of Elijah and Elisha almost a thousand years prior had anyone in Israel done anything so miraculous.

But in his compassion, Jesus also reached out to the woman in her time of grief. He did it by going up and touching the coffin. To us, this doesn't mean anything. But remember what we said before – contact with a dead body or anything that body touched would make you unclean. Jesus *chooses* to put himself in that situation to show his heart for the widow. He chooses to be ritually unclean so that she might know His concern for her. He didn't have to do it. We just got done hearing a story where Jesus healed a servant from a long way off! He could have just said the word and the young man would have risen. But Jesus doesn't want to keep his distance. Jesus makes God's presence known to the woman and her son and the town by his action. And Jesus is the only truly clean One. What He touches becomes clean. The boy who was dead and unclean is now alive and clean! This is not the way things worked. It always worked in reverse – unclean things made clean things dirty. But because of Jesus, the system was reversed. Through Him, the impure was made pure again. Of course, this pattern doesn't stop here. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, "God made Jesus, him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." On the cross that we celebrated just a few weeks ago, Jesus took all our sin on himself and by doing so brings us back to life! All who desire to be washed by Jesus' blood are declared clean, and he gives us the Holy Spirit to make us totally clean in our thoughts and words and actions.

So what does this whole thing mean for us? For us, just like for Jesus, we need to get our hands dirty. We need to get in the heart of the action to bring people to come to Christ. Because Christ is the only one who offers salvation. Christ is the only one who can bring us back to life. And I think when we get our own hands dirty, we'll find that God's gift of life and salvation becomes even more real.

Just two weeks ago, between our two services, we had over a hundred people in church. That's a fantastic number! Now last week we had somewhere in the 30s...not great, but not surprising after Easter. But all I can think about is this...what if that was every week? And what if a hundred people in this church was a lousy number? What if that was a bad week? I see this church growing to the point that we're bursting at the seams with two services. And thinking that way has nothing to do with "wanting to grow" or "getting more donations" or any earthly thing. It has to do with one thing: reaching the lost for Christ.

It's going to take going out into our communities. It's going to have to be intentional. It's going to have to be a new vision. A vision where we as a body of believers commit to living out our faith so strongly that we can't help but share it with everyone around us. A vision where we weep for the lost. We read a few weeks ago how Jesus wept for the lost souls of Jerusalem who wouldn't accept God, and He wants us to have the same heart for the lost. A vision where we care enough about the lost to meet them where they are and get into the deep rough stuff of life with them. And that means living out our faith even when it gets uncomfortable.

Craig Groeschel is the pastor of LifeChurch, which is doing huge things; they have churches in six states and on the Internet. He's written a book called *It* – and *It* is the drive and ability to reach people for Christ through the church. And he says this: "Ministries with it remember that Jesus came for outsiders. He came for those who were lost. Broken. Hurting. Disenfranchised. Alone. Overlooked. Poor. Jesus came for those whom religion rejected. Many churches unwittingly focus inward and forget those who are the very purpose for Jesus' coming, the very purpose for our being here on earth. These churches are like a hospital which no longer accepts patients." There are people out there who need someone they can trust. They need a friend. They need someone they can turn to when their marriage goes south or their job goes under. And in fact, even the person who seems to have everything completely together still needs that new life that Christ gives.

And the way we reach them is to get our hands dirty. But how? Most of us don't know how to do this. We have our own social circles. After a while, Christians tend to hang out with other Christians. We don't know that many unbelievers. We might know Lutherans or Catholics or Baptists or non-denominational folks, but we don't know folks who haven't ever heard of Jesus Christ or who have been scared off from church because of a bad experience with somebody who called themselves a Christian. Craig Groeschel's solution? Pray. He writes, "Ask God to increase your heart for those without Christ. He will. Before long, He will send you someone – maybe a bunch of someones – whom you'll care about. Your love for them will increase. When that happens, you get it, and it's almost impossible to turn off. Your prayer life increases. You're looking for opportunities to shift conversations towards spiritual things. You're ever aware that you're representing Christ. When you have it, people tend to want it. Your passion for Christ is contagious."

Now the next question we ask is this: what do we do if those people don't fit the typical model of Christianity? What if they smoke, drink, have problems with drugs and alcohol, have messy personal relationship problems, have a criminal background? It's OK. We want everyone, and I mean everyone, in the church. God's salvation and transformation is big enough for everyone. Does this mean we ignore sin or just say sin doesn't count any more? No. God has told us in His Word that sin is what separates us from Him. It's a cancer fatal to our souls. But the church is an emergency room for people to be brought back to life spiritually. You don't treat a disease you don't even know you have! And think of it this way...think about the first time that you went to play in the school band or went to baseball practice. Nobody expected you to play a concerto or hit a home run your first time out. It took training. It took time to learn how to do it, and mistakes are a part of it. And baseball is a good analogy. The best hitters in the game, the people who have the top stats and make millions of dollars each season, they don't even make it on base 6 out of the 10 times they're up to bat. 6 out of 10 times, they're out before they even get to first. The church is the place where we learn what it means to follow God. We're going to mess it up, and that's OK. Our goal is not to be perfect; our goal is to find forgiveness and spread that forgiveness everywhere we go.

We've got to invite everybody to the church, even those people that you don't think will like it, people that are on the fringes, because Christ has compassion for them just like He had compassion on the centurion's servant and the widow. He cares for them *so much*. Let's get them into the church and let them hear the good news and let God transform them into the people He wants them to be. All we can be are faithful servants who do what Christ did, and Christ brought people to His Father. He taught them the truth, from the highest rabbi to the prostitute, and He let them decide if they would fall away or if they would follow. He would guide them, correct them, love them, even scold them. But He wouldn't just do nothing.

I have a commitment I'm going to make to you as part of this. For the last several months, I've worked out of the church office every day because it was stable...stable for me in my transition and stable for the church. Coming out of three years of interim pastors, we've needed the ability to say, "Look, Jason's at the church; he's here for us." And I am still going to be around the office and I am here for you. But the truth is, it's really rare for somebody to just come into the church and want to have a conversation. It's happened twice in the last eight months. Statistically, most people who aren't a part of a church don't trust pastors – they think of us all as bad televangelists. Seriously! And if they were to want to talk about spiritual things with someone, they wouldn't come know where to start or where to go. So the times that I *can* work away from the office, reading books to prepare my sermon or getting a Bible study or confirmation class ready, I *will* be away from the office. I'll be finding coffeehouses and bookshops and libraries where I can be in the community. I don't expect that it will bring the masses into the church, but I hope to bring the church to them in some small way. And I encourage you to find the same sort of thing in your day. Find some way to make a connection. It doesn't have to start spiritual. It can be a friendship that starts at the bowling league or at the salon. But we all have people that maybe we alone can reach, to encourage to come to church, to encourage to be a part of the Christian life.

Jesus has brought us back to life. Even though we were dead in our sins, even though we had turned away from God, Jesus died to bring us back to the Father, and all who believe in Him and follow His path back home to God have eternal life. If all this is new to you, if you've never experienced that new life, I encourage you to find it today. Turn away from the things that have driven a wedge between you and God and turn to Christ, and He will bring you back to life too. And He will help you share that new faith. If you want to know more, talk to me at the end of the service so that you might know God's new life in your life.

For those of us who are here each week, who have committed to following Christ wherever He leads, I have but one question: are you ready to get your hands dirty so that the lost might come back to life? Let's pray.