

Grace and peace from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Savior,  
amen.

Take a close look at these two pictures. They're from a grave in Hanover, Germany. This grave is very unusual because on top of the grave site are these huge slabs of granite and marble cemented together and fastened with heavy steel clasps. This grave belongs to a woman by the name of Henriette Juliane Caroline von Rüling (1756 – 1782). Henriette did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Yet strangely, she directed in her will that her grave be made so secure that if there were a resurrection, it wouldn't affect her. On the marker are inscribed these words: "This burial place must never be opened."

Well... I think you can see, it didn't work that way... In the dirt beneath those slabs of marble and granite was a tiny seed. And in time – even though it was covered with those huge blocks of stone, the seed began to grow, and it slowly pushed its way through the dirt and out from the slabs. As it forced its way up, the marble and granite were gradually shifted so that the steel clasps that held them were wrenched from their sockets. This grave site has been used in several horror movies and it looks quite eerie. More on this later...

The story in our Gospel text for today about Jesus raising the widow's son outside the gate of the town of Nane is quite a strange tale. I mean, imagine this

sort of thing happening today. I've just completed a beautiful Funeral service here at Trinity and the coffin is loaded into the Hearst and the funeral procession is headed to the cemetery where we'll commit our loved one to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It's the finale of a life well lived. As we proceed down the road cars stop to pay their respect and the motorcade proceeds straight through all the stop signs and traffic lights. Then, about halfway there, a man steps out from the sidewalk and stops the procession. He comes over to the Hearst and calls to the dead person to come out. At this point I'm pretty irate at this man for interrupting our Funeral. Jesus has a way of ruining a good funeral...

Of course, funerals were very different back in the ancient days of Jesus. We put our dead inside steel coffins with locking bolts to make sure the lid doesn't come open. Then we put the coffin inside a cement vault with a heavy cement lid that is also glued and bolted shut. Not much getting in or out of one of these... This was much different in ancient Israel. The bodies were spiced and wrapped in linen cloths. The coffin would be not much more than a flat board where they would lay the body. At most it might have side walls to prevent the body from slipping off the board as it was being carried from the person's place of death to the tombs, which were located outside of the town gate, where no water flowed nearby. This was because the dead were considered unclean and had to be buried

outside of town where heavy rains wouldn't cause the bodies to contaminate their source of water.

I guess if Jesus were to raise a person today, he would need some tools to open the coffin. We have perfected the art of the Funeral Service so that once we've said our goodbyes, that lid is closed and nobody need be troubled by seeing the corpse again. This too was so different back in the ancient days of Israel. Once the person was placed into the tomb they were laid out on a slab of stone and the family was able to continue taking care of the body with additional spices and oils. After a period of time the body would decay and the bones would be scraped off into a small cement box, called a sarcophagus. These boxes were stored in the closest thing to what we would call a cemetery. That process might take three or more years. After the bones were removed, the tomb could be reused for another body. That's why the Gospel's tell us the tomb Jesus was laid into was never used before, most tombs were used over and over again.

There are three things this story shows us about God's sovereignty. First, death and sorrow are coming out the gate of the town. Death was literally coming out the gate like a roast on a silver platter. In this case more like a wooden platter... Second, life and hope were just arriving on the scene. Along came Jesus the light of the world, the Son of God, our savior, and redeemer. Third, these two

powerful forces collide and the result is great celebration and joy. For one who was lost has now been found, one who was dead is now alive...

Of all funerals, this would have been the most heart wrenching. This was most likely a young man who had not yet married. He was the sole support of his mother. He had so much of life yet to live. His mother, a widow, now has lost her only son. She is now a ward of the state, destined to a life of abject poverty. She had no one to support her and her life was just about worthless. People at most funerals have a tendency to be pre-occupied with the one who died when they first arrive; and then they think about those who are left behind, but eventually we all begin think about ourselves and we ask questions like, "I wonder when it's going to be my turn?" "I wonder if I'll be next?" "I wonder what's going to happen to me when I die?" "And I wonder what's going to happen to my family when I'm gone?" As much as we ask ourselves these questions; as soon as the service is over, most of us put thoughts of our death behind us and as far out of our conscious as we are able. We seal those thoughts of our own mortality in compartments in our brains that we hope will never be opened. Here's the dirty truth of it all. Whether we face it or not; we're all part of the procession that's headed for the graveyard. Regardless of how we've lived our lives, all of us are going to either see Jesus come back or we're going to face Him in death. Death is one of the consequences of sin and it comes hand in hand with a whole lot of misery. Yet,

even in the face of death we can have hope. This raising of the Widow's Son shows us what happens when death and sorrow collide with life and hope; everything changes. Even the bonds of death itself are broken and the dead are set free. That's why I always quote Saint Paul at funerals where he said that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our hope, our trust, our confidence in the face of death is that death does not get the last word. The last word will be spoken by our loving and gracious redeemer who will interrupt your beautiful funeral service and shout your name and command you to rise and be loved by your God and your Savior.

What a joyful rising that will be for everyone. There will be no more pain, no more sorrow, because Jesus has wiped out the reason for our pain and grief. Death itself will be destroyed and we will rise again along with that widow's son, Lazarus, and all of our loved ones too.

So, death and sorrow were coming out the gate while life and hope were going in and when they clashed; victory and celebration went everywhere. Only God knows the number of our days. As for me, I want to start the celebrating now. But wait a minute... That widow's son wasn't raised just to spent the rest of his days partying like it's 1999. He waws raised and given back to his mother. He was raised to go back to his life of taking care of his mother who was also a

widow. Taking care of orphans and widows and all the less fortunate was part and parcel of how Jesus was and why he came to earth.

You were all raised from the dead. Yes, you heard me correctly. In your Baptism you died and were raised to new life, just like that widow's son. My question to you is this; now that you have already inherited eternal life, what is your calling. Not all of us are called to take care of a widow, but we are all raised up into God's Kingdom on earth with a calling and a purpose...

Let's go back to the grave in Hanover Germany. The one that Henriette wanted to stay shut forever. Just think about this for a moment. If a tiny Birch Tree seed has the power to open a grave sealed with that much stone, cement, and steel, how much more is the power of the one who created the seed in the first place! Our Awesome God certainly has the power to open the graves of all people when the resurrection finally comes. A tiny seed had become a tree and this tree pushed aside the stones and the grave was opened. Listen, when Jesus comes back, all the dead are going to rise – even those who will be quite surprised by it!

May you trust in the capability and the willingness of Jesus to meet your darkness and collide with such a force that it turns even your darkest day into a bright new dawn with love and joy to share. I say, why wait, let the celebration begin! Thanks be to our awesome God! Amen.