Resuscitation and Resurrection

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
The Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 5, 2016

As some of you know, a couple of Sundays ago, I drove down to North Carolina to be with my dad who was getting prepped for a quickly scheduled heart surgery the following Monday. I am happy to say that he came through double bypass surgery as well as could be expected. He is now at home recovering.

It was all quite unexpected. He had no real symptoms. He actually went in for a colonoscopy. During the procedure doctors were concerned with a slow heart rate, which led to a series of tests, which eventually revealed that he had very bad heart disease. If it hadn’t been for the colonoscopy the first symptom of his heart disease probably would have been death. So here’s something I never thought I’d say: thanks be to God for colonoscopies!

But before the surgery my dad was pretty worried. This was the first time he’s had any serious medical problems. So it was pretty scary for all of us. And, as we were talking on Sunday night, I could tell he was wondering if he should go through with the surgery. He was afraid for a number of reasons. But what most frightened him, he said, was the worry that when they wheeled him out for surgery early the next morning that that might be the last time he saw my mother and me.

I said, “Pop, I think after the surgery we’ll see each other again.”

But it’s a real fear, isn’t it. Death is always a wrenching of relationships. There are a lot of good reasons to fear death. But one of the most persistent and heart-rending is the fear of the end of relationship with the people we love.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus interrupts a funeral procession. There is a young man being carried outside of the city on a bier, a stretcher, because burials are prohibited inside the city walls. There is a large crowd of accompanying mourners, many of whom by custom would be crying loudly to provide cover for the unspeakable grief of the mother. How compassionate and wise these ancient customs were. And, also by custom, the bereaved mother walks in front of her son. And who could know the depths of her grief? We are told she is a widow so we know she has already experienced the searing loss of a spouse. We aren’t told whether her parents were still alive, but she may have already experienced the profound loss of one’s parents. But now she has lost her only son. As Luke Powery puts it, it is “one of life’s dirtiest tricks, when a child precedes a parent in death and the parent has to bury their own child and see them travel from the womb to the tomb.”

We do know that she was weeping, because Jesus tells her, “do not weep.” He saw her crying and we are told that he had compassion for her. But our English word “compassion” doesn’t really capture what the word Luke uses really means. It’s actually means a deep visceral response, as deep as his bowels. It’s more like what we mean when we say something was “gut-wrenching.” Jesus saw this widow’s grief over the loss of her only son and his gut was

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wrenched, and it moved him to interrupt the procession. And, against all custom, Jesus touches the bier, violating Jewish purity laws, which say that touching the bier of a dead man will cause you to be ritually impure. But, as is always the case with Jesus’ touch, his holiness makes the impure pure rather than the other way around. And, in this case, Jesus touches death and transforms it into life. He tells the young man to rise and he does, and he begins to speak. And then notice, it says, “Jesus gave him to his mother.” Jesus knew the source of the deepest grief of the mother who lost her son. It was the gut wrenching loss of relationship with her only son. So Jesus doesn’t just restore the son to life. He also restores his relationship with his mother. Jesus gave him to his mother.

This story functions in a couple of ways in Luke’s Gospel. On the one hand, it looks backward, because it echoes the story of the prophet Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephath that we heard in our Old Testament lesson. No wonder, then, that the people who witness Jesus’ miracle exclaim, “a great prophet has arisen in our midst.” But on the other hand, the story also looks forward, because it foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the only son, will also be lead outside the city walls where he will suffer, die, and rise again. Jesus raising the widow’s son from the dead is a sign of his greater victory over death that will be known in the resurrection. But it is only a sign. It is not resurrection. Scholars call it a ‘resuscitation’ to make the distinction clear, because even though son was brought back to life, it is clear that it is only temporary. The son will someday die a human death as we all do. Resurrection, however, is about eternal life. It is complete victory over death. Jesus having been raised from the dead dies no more. Our hope of resurrection is a hope for eternal life.

This context is important because the story taken alone raises a whole lot of hard questions, at least a whole lot of hard questions for me. A couple of things that I suppose won’t come as a big surprise given my vocation as a priest. On the one hand, I believe in miracles. I believe in the miracles of Jesus as they are attested to in Holy Scripture. And some of my closest family and friends, who aren’t particularly religious, think I’m nuts, and maybe some of you do too, and that’s okay. We still love one another. But, on the other hand, I haven’t witnessed a whole lot of miracles in my life. More often, in my vocation, I have tried to comfort people who have suffered profound loss: loss of parents and spouses and children who aren’t coming back. This is surely anguishing, but it is also true.

So, in order for me to see the story of Jesus raising the widow’s son as good news, I have to see it as pointing to the greater reality of the resurrection. Like I said, I believe in miracles. I believe they have happened and can happen. I pray for them all the time. But the reality is that they often don’t. And even when they do, they are only temporary. But the hope of the resurrection is a hope for complete victory over death. Resurrection life is eternal life. It is the hope expressed by Paul who says, “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is the hope expressed by John of Patmos in the book of Revelation, who says, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” It is the hope we have that in the resurrection we will be not only completely reconciled to God, but also restored to relationship with the saints and our loved ones who have gone before us in an eternal community of love. That is our great hope. That is the greater victory.
And in the messiness and the confusion of day-to-day life and loss I need to remember this, because in this world the line between the miraculous and the non-miraculous isn’t always easy to see. A couple days after my dad’s surgery, I went for an early morning run before going to the hospital. And, as I was running, I recalled the conversation I had with my dad’s surgeon after the operation. He told me how successful he felt everything went. He told me how they took arteries from his leg and used them to make new arteries for the blood to be pumped by the heart. Amazing, I thought. And as I was running and thinking about this amazing procedure it suddenly struck me that God created this young man and gave him incredible gifts, and gave him a calling to help people. God created him and made him a smart little boy, who studied hard and got good grades, who went to college at Dartmouth and medical school at Penn, and who honed his skills through many years of training and experience. And God put him in that operating room with my father and he saved his life. And I remembered all the people -- family, friends, and people from church -- who were praying for my father, and I just felt that God was present and active in all this, whether it be miraculous or otherwise. And I felt gratitude and consolation. And I remembered Paul’s words from Romans: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Someday, I don’t know when, my father will die. And no matter when it happens it will be anguishing and heart-rending. And who knows, he may still worry that he will never see my mother and me again. But even so, I think my response will still be the same. Pop, I think, I’m going to see you again.