

## SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

OCTOBER 9, 2022

LUKE 7: 11-16

### “CHRIST WILL RAISE UP OUR DEPARTED LOVED ONES”

Death comes to everyone. Sometimes it comes gradually---we see it approaching. Sometimes it comes suddenly. But it does come!

John Ruskin, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century British art historian, wished to always remember that death could come at any time. So on his desk he had a plaque with just one word on it---“TODAY”. It was a constant reminder to him that death come at any time... even today! (Father Anthony Coniaris, Treasures From Paul’s Letters, Vol. 1, p. 120)

However and whenever death comes----suddenly or gradually----it is very hard for those left behind. When we lose a close loved one, comfort is needed. And where we who are Christians get our comfort is from our Lord Jesus Christ. We stand by the coffin and the graveside. We, of course, are sad....but then we think about the Lord and we are comforted.

Today’s gospel reading from Luke 7 is about a time when Christ came upon a funeral procession. This was an especially sad funeral. The man who died was the only child of a widow. That meant that she had no one left now to care for her. She would now be all alone. Then Jesus came to her side----but not to give her condolences. He came to bring her deceased son back to life!

When we lose someone, we may think to ourselves if we remember this story---“Well, that’s nice that the Lord raised her son back to life....but what about my loved one who has just died? Can’t he raise up my loved one, too?” Yes, He can! And He will!

Do not think the loved one you buried will stay buried. Because one day Jesus will return to this world and on that day He will raise up your departed ones from their graves. Christ has not forgotten your loved ones that have died. He remembers each one and where they are buried. Their graves are only temporary. The great Orthodox novelist, Dostoevsky, put the following epitaph on his mother’s gravestone---“Lie here, beloved dust, *until* the joyful dawn.” “Until....”—he knew her grave was temporary. (C. M. Woodhouse, Dostoevsky, Roy Publishers, 1951, p. 75)

Graves and mausoleums seem strong, unbeatable. But it’s not so. There was a woman in Hanover, Germany who thought the idea of bodily resurrection was gross and creepy. She did not want anyone taking her out of her grave! So she arranged that after she was interred large slabs of concrete would be put her grave and a large sign put up that read, “This grave must never be opened. But some years later a little seed happened to fall into a

tiny crack in the granite. The seed germinated and a tiny little twig of a plant began to grow. Eventually, it grew into a tree and the roots broke the granite slab and even tore up her grave and her body was exposed---and taken out for reburial. If a little seed can break a body out of its tomb, how much more can the Lord do so! ("Our Daily Bread", 3/31/02)

He will come back. He will open up the graves and raise up and glorify the bodies of our departed. We don't know when but, sooner or later, it will happen.

Meanwhile, what is the current situation of those have fallen asleep in Christ? Their bodies rest in the graves while their spirits have gone to be with God. In Revelation 6, St. John has a vision of heaven the way it is now. In that vision he sees the souls of Christians. They are in a very good place----safe and secure and awake right under the heavenly altar of God. What better place to be! Their bodies are here awaiting resurrection; their souls are in the very presence of the Almighty.

And meanwhile, we pray for them. In our funerals, our liturgies, our memorial services, our own personal prayers-----we pray for our departed loved ones. We do this because St. Paul did--see II Timothy 1: 16-28. Not all Christian groups do this. We pray for the departed. The Roman Catholics pray for the departed. Protestants do not believe in doing so. (If you go to many funerals, you've noticed the difference. In our funerals, most of the prayers are for the deceased person. In Protestant funerals, there are no prayers for the deceased.)

We pray that God will bless them as they wait for Resurrection Day. We pray that God will give them even more joy, more light, a closer union with Him as they wait. (For the life above is not static----there is growth and a moving upward as St. Gregory Palamas clearly taught.) And we pray for the day to come soon when Jesus will visit their graves and raise them up as He did in our reading today from Luke 7.

Of course, there are millions upon millions of graves in our world. How can Christ open them all up? I have no idea. But, after all, He is divine and so He can do it!

Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday, is one of the traditional days for priests to bless graves in our Orthodox Faith. It's not always easy to find all the graves. Sometimes people give me the name of the cemetery, and the section, row, and grave numbers. But there are times when that doesn't really work too well----in some cemeteries, those numbers don't work well at all. So sometimes I just can't find the grave. Sometimes the family has to come with me another day to find it. This year, there were so many graves to bless, so many cemeteries to visit that I ran out of time..... And so now, every so often, I go back out to the cemeteries to "catch up".

The Lord won't have that problem. He won't need a map or a GPS to find your grandma's grave. He knows where she's buried and He will raise her up. Her body and soul will be

reunited in a higher and glorious state to live forever in joy in the New Heaven and New Earth.

In our gospel reading today, the Lord sees a funeral procession. He doesn't just walk away. And He doesn't just bow His head out of respect or say words of condolence to the mother. He stops the procession, like a man flagging down a hearse, and proceeds to bring the dead man back to life! And He will one day bring our beloved departed back to life.

The great Scottish writer of the 1800's, Thomas Carlyle, was a religious man in some ways, but certainly not a traditional believing Christian. Death came into his family one day when a close relative died---it was very sad as it was a young nephew of his. The family, all very strong traditional Scottish Reformed Christians, gathered at the house around the coffin and there wept and prayed and comforted one another. Someone read a passage from the gospel of John where Jesus says He will raise the dead. Thomas Carlyle then said the following out loud---"Jesus, if you are God then you have a right to say you will raise the dead. But if you were only a man, how can you know more than anyone else?" (The Man From Outside, Gordon Bridger, Inter-Varsity Press, pp. 134-135)

We, unlike Thomas Carlyle, are Christians. We believe that Jesus is both God and man. And so we believe what He said when He proclaimed that He would raise the dead.

And when we pray for the deceased, we are declaring our faith.....

---Faith that Christ can and did raise the dead 2000 years ago, like in our gospel reading today.

---Faith that he will do it again when one day He returns.

Jesus Christ will return and He will raise up our departed beloved ones. Praise be to God!