

The Exception Proves the Rule

The power of the resurrection stands in the hands of Him who died. Not only did He rise from the dead, but Jesus also raised those who were in need of His life, as a sign and proof of His future resurrection and ours.

In raising the dead Jesus showed His passionate love for those who suffered most when death came among them. He returns to women their men, when they had need of a protector and supporter in the daily life of first century Judaism. Jesus sees to the need of the widow and the fatherless by raising the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17) and the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11). He has compassion on the widow and fatherless as the God who is moved to tears by their suffering (John 11:35) and will not leave them alone in their grief. He has power over death because His is the indestructible life, who in His death conveys life to a dying world. The resurrection of the widow's son and Lazarus are the exceptions that prove the rule.

The rule is that those who are in Christ will live, because they have been baptised into His death and His life. The divine expression of life that comes in Jesus' earthly ministry tells us how we shall stand in our death, and how our loved ones will stand when we die. Jesus is with us and with them as death's death and life's life.

Jesus stops the career of death dead in its bier-carrying tracks. Often traffic will stop or at least keep their distance when a funeral cortege appears. People switch their headlights on as a sign of respect. No one really wants to interrupt a funeral cortege. So when Jesus does not just stand aside when the open coffin of the young man comes out of town wending its way to the town cemetery, He is breaking a major community taboo. Instead, He steps right into the way of the procession and forces it to stop. No, it will not arrive before the open mouth of the tomb. Jesus' interruption may well have heightened the grief of the widow who was following her only son to his final resting place. What right had this stranger to intervene in their funeral rites?

Not only does Jesus stop the career of death just outside the gates of Nain, He grasps death by the throat by placing His hand upon the open coffin. In that way, He comes into contact with death in a way no Jew would do, except for the highest necessity. That necessity was providing funeral rites for loved ones. Contact with death made those who permitted it ritually unclean. Cleansing had to follow, before God could be approach. The God who is life could not abide in His holy presence those tainted by death (Lev 11:31-32). Jesus stops the procession with the open coffin with His hand, that death's whole uncleanness might be absorbed by Him for our sakes. He becomes unclean with death to take away death's sting when He absorbs death into Himself. His Father cannot abide His presence, and yet He comes to the holy of holies of the cross fitted in death's dress. The Father kills death in Him. He dies that He may make a mockery and by-word of death by rising from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. Life and death clash and life is the victor for us. He raises the young man of Nain as a foretaste of the resurrection of all flesh yet to come. Jesus tells us how we and our loved ones will stand at death by defeating it. He is the exception that certainly proves the rule.