

OCTOBER 8, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

LUKE 7: 11-16

**“JESUS WILL REMEMBER OUR DEPARTED LOVED ONES”**

Death can come suddenly. Death can come gradually. For 59 in Las Vegas, it came very suddenly. Or it can be a matter of an elderly loved one fading away over years.... And is not rare when it comes as a total surprise.

As ancient Rome grew in size, they tended to build up, not out. Tenement buildings going up several stories. And there was no garbage removal system. So when people wanted to get rid of something-----sewage, general junk, worn out furniture, etc.----they would commonly just toss it out the window to fall down to the street below. Woe to you if you happened to be strolling down the street below their window right then! The Roman writer Juvenal said that if you wanted to go walking in Rome, you really should update your will before you did! You never knew what just might land on your head. (Cleopatra, Stacy Schiff, Back Bay Books, 2010, p. 117)

However death comes to our loved ones----surprise or expected, fast or slow----those that are left behind need comfort. And it is our faith in Jesus Christ that brings comfort to us. Today we are having a memorial for three who have recently fallen asleep in Christ. We certainly are saddened that they have been taken from us. But then we remember our Lord Jesus Christ....and that brings us comfort.

Today's gospel lesson, Luke 7: 11-16, is appropriate for a Sunday like today when we are lifting up in prayer our departed loved ones. In this reading, our Lord halts a funeral procession for the son of a widow. And he raises up the dead young man and brings him back to life. Definitely one of Jesus' greatest miracles!

However, when we ourselves lose a loved one to death, we may think: That is wonderful that Jesus raised that widow's son from death. But why didn't He do that for my loved one that died-----my husband or wife, or parent, or child, or brother, or sister, or friend? If He raises up the man in Luke 7, why not raise up my departed one?

On one level, there is a simple answer-----The Lord was physically present that day in a way He is not now physically present with us. So, He was there with the dead man in a different way than He is present with us.

So, does that mean that my departed loved ones will stay buried forever?

No, certainly not! Jesus Christ is not now present with us "in the flesh". But He is coming back. And when He comes back, He will resurrect your departed. He has not forgotten them. He remembers them, each and every one. He has raised the dead before, as we just heard in the gospel reading. And He will do it again when He returns at the end of time. He will raise up the ones you love that have died.

Yes, some of the departed have been waiting a long time, even centuries. But waiting means there is something a person is waiting for.

In Louisiana, there is a gravestone for a woman buried in a cemetery there. It's a very simple marker. It gives the woman's name and just one more word—"Waiting". (in "Our Daily Bread", 4/11/09)

And so our departed ones are waiting for their day of resurrection. And one day their waiting will be over. (And, of course, unless Christ returns before our own deaths, we will be doing some waiting, too-----but then He just might come back before we die!)

You have many loved ones who have died. They are buried in different places; for some of you, even in different countries. But Jesus Christ knows where every one of them is. And He will raise them all. None are forgotten, none are lost. He loves each one of them and raise up each one. Yes, like that Louisiana woman, they are waiting. But one day the waiting will end when Christ brings them out of their tombs in their new Resurrection bodies---glorified, transformed, healthy, and whole.

But not just yet. The time hasn't come yet, although it may soon. Why does the waiting continue? We really don't know why. But one day, in God's timing, the waiting will end.

Meanwhile, while they are in this period of waiting, what is their situation? Their bodies are in the ground. And if they fell asleep in Christ, their souls have gone on to be with God. In Revelation 6, St. John had a vision of heaven wherein he sees in heaven of departed martyrs for Christ. Where are they? Right at the heavenly altar of God. What better place to be! They are with God, right at His altar above. Their bodies are back down here waiting.....their souls are with the Lord.

And, again, meanwhile, we pray for them. In the memorial prayers at the end of today's liturgy, in funerals, in all liturgies, in many other services, in our own personal prayers----we pray for those that have gone on before us. We pray that God will continue to bless them in what the memorial prayers call the "place of righteousness" in God's presence as they await the Day of Resurrection at the end of time.

But a memorial service, such as we'll have today, is more than praying for our departed ones. It is also a statement of our faith, an act of our faith-----we are saying that we believe that Jesus Christ will one day raise them up.

That's why we commonly have the tray of wheat at the memorial services (3 trays today!). The wheat is a sign of our faith that Christ will raise up those we are praying for. Here's how it works-----a farmer takes a wheat kernel, apparently dead, and plants it in the ground in faith that in the future it will spring up and grow and bring forth good fruit. The wheat here this morning is our statement, and a reminder to us, that those we have "planted" in their graves will also one day spring up from the ground and go on, in the New Heaven and New Earth, to live forever and bring forth good fruit in the Kingdom of God.

Having the memorial service, having the wheat, shows our faith that Jesus will never forget our loved ones. He remembers them; He will resurrect them. He won't pass them by on that Last Day.

In today's gospel reading, the Lord sees a funeral procession. He doesn't just pass by it, just walk on..... He stops---and He raises up the deceased. And He won't pass by our loved ones, either. He won't forget them or neglect them. He will come back and resurrect them.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish writer, Thomas Carlyle, had some type of belief in God but was not a Christian in any traditional sense. One day death struck at his family—a young relative died. In great sorrow, the family gathered together around the body of the deceased and a family member read verses from the Gospel of John where Jesus very explicitly promised to raise up the dead from their graves. Carlyle, sad but still doubtful about the Christian Faith, spoke up and said, “Jesus, if you are God, you had a right to promise that. But if you were only a man, what do you know more than any of the rest of us?” (Gordon Bridger, The Man From Outside, InterVarsity Press, pp. 134-135)

We are Christians, people who believe Jesus Christ is God as well as man. And so we believe He could honestly say that He would raise the dead. And when we pray for our departed ones, we are declaring our faith: faith that Christ is divine and all-powerful; faith that He could and did raise the dead 2000 years ago; and faith that He will do it again at the end of the world.

Today, we will pray for three of our departed loved ones. We know Christ loves them, too. We know He has power to raise the dead.

That power and love combined means He will raise them up. He will not forget them. On the day He returns He won't pass them by. He will bring them out of their graves. Thanks be to God!