

Sermon for Sunday, June 5, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It all began
with an ordinary question.
A group of us were sitting around the table
in a yarn shop
working on our various projects.
“How was your Memorial Day weekend? What did you do?”
People chatted about cookouts, and visits with families,
and then they looked at me.
“I went to a colleague’s funeral. And buried the ashes of a thirteen year old called Gabi.”

I don’t think
they were expecting that.
A definite downer, pretty much guaranteed
to stop
any
conversation.

Except it didn’t.
What unfolded
was a wonderful conversation
about life
and death
and love.

The woman beside me
talked of her work colleague and dear friend
who she’d shared so much with
over the years,
but who, as she was dying
refused to let any of her friends go see her.
And how hard this was
for the friends
who wanted to support her,
wanted to encourage her,
wanted to say goodbye.

Another woman talked about her husband
who is a firefighter on an emergency response team,
who gets called in
to car accidents
and cardiac arrests
and any time
that people's lives are at risk.
Recently
he was called to an accident
where a five year old child had been hit by a car
during a block party.
"The child didn't make it," she said.
And she talked about how hard it can be
for him to do this
time and time again.

And I remembered Gabi's funeral,
and the unexpected joy there,
because of a special needs kid
punctuating the solemnity
with declarations
about how happy he was
when she was born,
and interrogations
about whether we had ceiling fans,
and if so, how many, which way did they turn,
and how did you turn them on.
His presence
was a blessing,
reminding us of life
in the midst
of death.

And as we talked about the people we have known
who have died,
at one end of the table a woman
began to weep.
Another woman got up
and put her hand on her shoulder.
And she began to tell us her story.

The year before last
her teenage son
took his own life.
They didn't expect it.
He was one of those kids
who is the life of the party,
laughing and joyful
and full of common sense.
And then he was gone.
And how much
she misses him,
but her husband
seems to act
as if he never existed.

And we gathered around her,
and she opened her wallet
and showed us photographs of her beautiful boy.
His senior photo.
Him and his little sister.
Him as a little boy.

And all the time
my mind kept coming back
to our gospel for today.
Jesus raising
the sone of the widow of Nain.

This isn't someone
who came begging for help, like last week's gospel,
a centurion sending messages to Jesus
to please heal his servant.
The widow, the mother,
doesn't even speak.
Jesus just happens to notice
the funeral procession
passing by
on its way to the burial ground
outside the city gates.

Not that he could have missed it -
a crowd of people
blocking the gate
and a man's body
being carried out on a stretcher,
his mother
swathed in black
and crying.

The conventional response
to such a procession
would be to stand well back
and wait for the procession to pass,
bowing your head
out of respect.

But Jesus - as usual - ignores convention.
And he steps forward,
and says to the woman
"Do not weep,"
and then he reaches out
and touches the bier,
and everyone freezes.
Because they all know
that to touch a dead body
is to make yourself
ritually unclean,
and no stranger
willingly does that.
And he says,
"Young man, rise!"
And the body
sits up,
and begins to speak,
and Jesus puts out his hand
and helps him down,
and hands him
to his mother.

We don't hear

any more of the story,
all the things
we would like to know.
How did the mother respond?
What was it like for the young man?
Did he have stories to tell
about what it was like to be dead?
And for the legalistic among us,
was Jesus ritually unclean?
At what point
did the young man
come back to life,
and did Jesus, technically speaking,
touch a dead man
or a live one?

Luke
doesn't tell us.
What he does tell us
is that people were overwhelmed.
Our translation said that fear seized them;
the work used
is actually more like reverence.
Which makes sense of what comes next -
they glorified God,
and recognized
that Jesus' actions
were those of a prophet, one sent by God.

And they went home,
and told their neighbors,
who told their cousins, who told their friends,
and the good news of Jesus, God at work among them,
spread throughout the area.

It's a great story.
Jesus brings back to life
the only son of a widow,
an incredible gift
made even richer by the fact that without her son

she would have been thrown into poverty, reliant on begging and the generosity of strangers.

But - and there's always a but, isn't there? -
how does this story relate to us?
Because God doesn't raise our children to life.
Not now, in this present life, anyway.
We pray and pray and pray
and still, most of the time, our children,
and parents,
and husbands and wives,
and siblings
and best friends
die.

If Jesus doesn't bring back our loved ones,
then if anything,
this story brings more trouble with it,
underlying
the unfairness
and unpredictability of it all.

I don't think
that there are any easy answers
to the question
of why someone we loves dies.
But I do think
there are hints here in this story
of how we can respond
when someone loses
a person they love.

And that hint comes
in verse thirteen,
when it says
that Jesus was moved with compassion for the widow, the mom.
Sometimes English
just can't quite get the idea
that was conveyed in the original Greek of the bible.
The word that is translated

“moved with compassion”

is actually derived from the word *splanxna*,
which means the inward parts, the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. In other words,
the guts.

And so the closest expression we have to what Jesus felt,
is that his guts were wrenched.

As Jesus saw the gutwrenching sorrow
of the woman
he went to her.
And spoke.
And acted.

I don't have the power of healing that Jesus had,
and I suspect that most of you don't either.
But what we do have
is the ability to be moved by compassion,
the ability
to have our gets wrenched
by the tragedy around us
and to speak and act.

Thursday
was National Gun Violence Awareness Day.
People were encouraged to wear orange,
and many of the bishops of the Episcopal Church,
including our own bishop Larry,
encouraged their clergy to wear orange stoles this Sunday.
When I posted a photo on Facebook of me wearing my orange t-shirt,
someone posted a comment saying
that they basically couldn't see the point.
In other words
it's an empty gesture.
But I don't think it is.
Because if one person
sees me wearing orange,
and knows that someone cares
about their loved one who has been killed,
it's worth it.

And in case you don't think it touches anyone you know,
remember Diane, our intern?

One of the parishioners
at her parish
lost her son
to a drive by shooting last year.
And other clergy in our diocese
have had to bury people killed by gun violence.

Of course, there are many other things
that need to be done
to address gun violence.
But at least it's a beginning.

But that's not the only way
we can follow Jesus' example in this passage.

One of the things
my sister-in-law finds hardest
is when she goes to the school gate
to pick up Gus.
And no one talks with her.
No one
says anything about Lockey.
They avoid her,
as if death
were contagious.

The woman at the knitting store
said the same things.
How she's given up looking people in the eye
because it's easier than having them avoid her.
She wants to talk
about her son,
to keep his memory alive with words.
But all too often
she only hears
silence.

We Christians claim

that Christ has gained victory over death.
And while we mourn
at the loss of every human being
we also have hope
that this is not the end.
We
have a gift
that is rare in our culture.

And yet
we so often
fail to use it.
We allow ourselves
to become infected
by our culture's terror
of death.

But we don't have to.
We can talk about death.
We can allow ourselves
to be affected by the stories
of the fears we have
of losing someone,
and the loved ones
we have lost.

We can reach out our hands,
our ears,
our words,
even our tears,
all in the name of our Savior,
Jesus Christ.
Amen.