

This week, like last week, we hear sayings of Jesus that require faith to receive. Last week, we heard Jesus say, “Do not be anxious,” and we trust His words because He is the God who loves us and will take care of us.

This week, we see both words and actions of Jesus that, at first, make no sense. But then we see why Jesus speaks and acts as He does, and this gives us confidence in the times where we are waiting for that fulfillment, times when we rely on faith.

As our Gospel reading begins, we hear that Jesus is approaching the town of Nain, accompanied by a large crowd. This takes place shortly after Jesus has healed the centurion’s servant, and so no doubt this crowd is following in part because of that incredible act of healing and power.

Yet as they approach, they are met by another large crowd. This crowd, coming out of the town, isn’t one of joy, but of sadness. We read, “And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow.” The crowd gathered around the Lord of life collides with a crowd gathered around one taken by death.

At this collision, Christ speaks words to this grieving widow, and at first they seem to be inappropriate or unfeeling. He tells her, “Do not weep.” Now, for we who have the whole account in front of us and know how it turns out, we can clearly see why Jesus would tell her this.

But put yourself in her shoes. She’s lost her son, her only son, to death. And she’s a widow, so she’s already lost her husband as well. As her son was a young man, she’s almost certainly past the age of being able to remarry and have more children, children to provide for her, to care for her, to be with her in her old age. She’s alone, her whole family claimed by death.

Perhaps her community will step in to care for her, but she’s completely at their mercy to do so. She of course should trust in God to watch over her, but the deaths of her husband and her son would certainly be an enormous strain on her faith. In the midst of all that, Jesus comes to her and says, “Do not weep.”

These difficult-to-understand words are then accompanied by difficult-to-understand actions. After Jesus speaks to the widow, “He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still.”

I’m sure part of the reason these guys stood still is they were wondering what on earth is going on. This guy at the head of a large crowd just told a mourning mother to stop crying, and then He comes over and takes hold of the bier. Talk about strange!

This would be like if you saw a funeral procession driving down the road, but instead of respectfully pulling over while it went past, you parked your car in the middle of the road, got out, and went up and knocked on the hearse windows. Who would do such a thing?

And then there's the whole uncleanness factor. Dead bodies, in Old Testament ceremonial law, were unclean, and if you touched one, then you were unclean as well. Why would some stranger make himself unclean by grabbing that which carried a corpse?

Think of what must have been going through the mother's head by this point. Grief. Confusion. Maybe even a little anger. "Who is this guy, and what did He say, and what is He doing to my son?!" The words and actions of Christ are at a minimum, confusing, if not a little bit offensive.

But then comes the next words of Jesus. "Young man, I say to you, arise!" At first glance, this is even crazier than telling a mother to not weep at the funeral of her son. Jesus is speaking to a corpse. Doesn't He know that the dead don't hear, that the dead can't hear? It would be like taking a deaf man aside and telling him, "Ephphatha!" "His ears don't work! What are you doing, Jesus?" Why is Jesus telling a dead man to get up?

But Jesus here speaks those words that show His great authority: "I say to you." Note the difference between His words and those of the prophet Elijah in our Old Testament reading. Both raise a dead young man, but Elijah must pray and cry out to God. The prophet makes the request, but it must be God who hears and acts.

Not so with Jesus. Jesus doesn't ask; He commands. He is the author of life, the God who has life in Himself. He tells the dead to arise, and they arise. Death must surrender its hold on this young man. The effects of sin are undone at the words of Jesus.

No sooner does Jesus give his words of command than the man sits up and begins speaking, showing restoration in both body and mind. And then what happens? "Jesus gave him to his mother." Christ restored not only the body and mind of the young man, but He also restored this family which death had torn apart. The Word had brought restoration to the man, to His mother, and even to this community which had been in mourning.

Though the words and actions of Jesus had at first not made sense, and perhaps even caused some offense, at the end they had brought about joy and healing beyond what anyone could have imagined that day.

This healing and restoration are still what they words and actions of Jesus are for. The hard part for us is that, for the most part, in the big picture, we're still waiting for those final words of Jesus. To use the Gospel account for reference, we're not at the end yet, but rather at that point where Jesus has grabbed the coffin. What do I mean by this? Let me explain.

In the Scriptures, our Lord says many things to us along the lines of "Do not weep." For instance, we have last week's command to not be anxious. Or His words telling us to "Rejoice in the Lord always." Or Christ's saying, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." Or what of His instructions to live quiet and peaceable lives? Or what about His words, "Ask, you will receive, that your joy may be full."?

Like the weeping mother, we seem to have plenty of reasons that God's Word seems out-of-place or inappropriate. Causes for anxiety abound. And how do we rejoice in the Lord always when we are living lives afflicted by sorrow and loss? Do not fear those who can kill the body – what about if it's my friend's body that gets killed, or my child's?

How do we live quiet and peaceable lives when a not-insignificant portion of our society is actively opposed to the Christian faith and those who practice it? And in our prayers, we ask, and ask, and ask, but it seems like that there is much we don't receive, nor is our joy full. We hear our Lord's words to us in the Bible, and perhaps we feel like that widowed mother. "Do not weep"?

It's important that we then consider the actions that our Lord has taken in addition to the words He has spoken. When Jesus came up and grabbed hold of the open coffin, it was an action that made little human sense, but in so doing, He halted that young man's journey to the grave. On a much grander scale, our Lord has taken a similar action for all of humanity.

Like that woman, we too were on a tearful march toward the grave. Sin takes away our joy, our comfort, our peace. Death, the result of sin, tears apart our families, friendships, and communities. And in it all, we're powerless to stop it. All we could do is weep and lament, knowing that someday it will be us getting carried away to the grave. As Job lamented, "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble."

But then Christ comes. He sees our troubles, and as He did toward the grieving mother, He has compassion on us. Setting aside His glory, departing from the great crowd of cherubim and seraphim around His throne, the Son of God humbles Himself and is born of the Virgin. Almighty God, who was before time began, who lit the stars and sculpted the mountains, took on flesh and blood. As a true man, He felt our sorrows, experienced our griefs, endured our temptations. How strange that the Almighty Creator God would put Himself through all this!

And then, in an action even stranger than walking up and touching a casket, He of His own choosing marched up Golgotha and allowed Himself to be hung on a cross. On the cross, He took on something much worse than ceremonial uncleanness. There, the Son of God took the sins of the entire world into Himself. He bore the full guilt, suffered the full punishment, for every transgression that ever has been or will be committed.

And then, He spoke that triumphant last word from the cross: "It is finished." Three days later, the wonderful firstfruit of the tree of the cross was born when Jesus rose again in His body, never to die again. Forty days after that, He ascended far above the heavens to the Father's right hand, still in His glorified body, and yet once more taking up His boundless power and infinite wisdom.

And now... we wait. We are in that time of tension, that period after "Do not weep" but before "Young man, I say to you, arise!" We have watched Him halt our march toward the grave by His holy cross. We have had Him place His hands on us through the water of Baptism. But still, we are waiting for those next words, that next action.

For the mother, that time of tension was maybe only a few minutes. But for us, it has been our whole lives as Christians. The Church has waited for nearly two thousand years, waiting for those next words of Christ.

And they certainly will come. Moved by His perfect love and compassion, Jesus would not, could not have told the mother to stop weeping, grabbed the casket... and then said “Never mind” and walked away. No, before He had spoken His first word to that sorrowful woman, before He took His first step toward the dead man, already He knew exactly what He would do.

In the same way, there is no way way that our Lord would give His promises to us, give His life for us, and then just walk away. His truth will not permit Him to deceive us. His love will not permit Him to leave us nor forsake us.

He has fulfilled His promises that He would come as the Seed of the woman. He has fulfilled His promises that He will be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. He has fulfilled His promise that the Father will not let His Holy One see corruption.

And so, as He has fulfilled all these, He will not, He cannot, fail to fulfill His great and final promises, as He declared: “For the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

At the Last Day, the Lord Jesus, followed by the great crowd of the heavenly angels, will come to this world filled with death. On that day, He will cry out to all the dead as He spoke to the young man: “I say to you, arise!” At that command, the grave will give up all those it had claimed.

Those who had rejected the words and actions of Jesus for them will then be cast into the outer darkness for eternity. But for those who believed His words and rejoiced in His saving actions, Jesus will grant full and complete restoration. Just like the son given to his mother, all believers will be joined in perfect peace and love, restored to the presence of God Himself.

Though the time of our waiting for those next words of Jesus might seem long, in eternity it will seem even shorter than the time between the widow hearing “Do not weep” and then being given her resurrected son. As the words from Hebrews 10 exhort us, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.