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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Second Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, verses 11-17.

Funerals can be difficult for all involved. Yesterday I had a burial at 9:00 a.m. in the Mosswood Cemetery in Mashpee. As we gathered around the graveside you could hear thunder in a distance and also could see lightning in the sky. It began to rain, and I said to the wife of the deceased, "I usually don't like to rush, but I'm going to rush a bit here." She said, "Please rush."

A strange ad appeared in a newspaper's classified section. It was an ad for a used tombstone. The ad read like this: "Used tombstone for sale. Real bargain for someone named Homer Jones. For more information please call." A number was listed. A used tombstone. I guess the deceased no longer need it - a resurrection perhaps.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the famous missionary, once told about a layman who was called on to conduct a funeral service. Being an exact man, he wanted to do it right so he turned to the gospels to see how Jesus conducted a funeral. He found that Jesus didn't conduct funerals at all. He only performed resurrections. Not one person died in Jesus' presence. He came upon those who were already dead and resurrected them and gave them new life. There is no source of new life that is permanent except new life in Jesus.

Consider the three lessons from today's scripture readings. There are three well-known instances in the Bible besides the resurrection of Jesus in which people who were dead were brought back to life. The most famous story is found in the gospel of John, chapter 11, "Lazarus, come out," Jesus commanded outside of Lazarus' tomb, and Lazarus came out.

The second is found in today's lesson from the gospel of Luke when Jesus came upon a funeral procession. The only son of a poor widow had died, and she was distraught but Jesus said to her, "Don't cry." Then to the dead son he commanded, "Get up!" The scriptures tell us that the young man sat

up and began to talk.

There was another well-known incident in the Old Testament, and again it involved a widow and her only son. This time it was the prophet Elijah who was God's instrument. The widow's son was dead, but he was given new life when Elijah offered a prayer to God.

It seems clear to me from today's lessons that the busyness of faith is new life. St. Paul understood that. He discusses at length the transformation that took place in his own life when he encountered Jesus. Jesus did not bring him back from the dead in a physical sense. The death that Paul experienced was the death of the old self, the self that had been self-righteously persecuting the tiny, but fast-growing Christian community. It was the old self of unhappiness, fear and rigid adherence to the law. The new life Paul experienced was spiritual.

St. Paul's experience reminds me of two sisters I heard about who enjoyed attending wild parties - parties that were not consonant with Christian values. However, one day these sisters found new life in Jesus. They received an invitation to a party and sent their RSVP in these words: "We regret that we cannot attend because we recently died." Paul had died to the old self. Through Jesus he had received new life, abundant life. A loser became a winner. Paul got his life together. Paul knew who he was and what he was to do, and he knew who was with him. Paul became one of the most dynamic, one of the most articulate, one of the most influential men who has ever lived; but first of all, he needed life - abundant life - the life that only Jesus can give to us.

I think life is hopeless without Jesus. Many people live today in a fool's paradise. They keep themselves sedated with alcohol and drugs and the accumulation of fancy toys rather than confront the meaninglessness of their lives. They buy self-help books religiously but despair that so few real changes take place in their life. They seek to cultivate a positive attitude, but deep within they know it is a show, a sham, because their lives are desolate. They are like the soldier who was in an army guard house, and another prisoner asked him, "How long are you in for?" "Thirty days," he answered. "What did you do?" asked the first soldier. "I was AWOL (that's absent without leave)," replied the second soldier. "What are you in for?" "Three days," answered the first soldier. "What did you do?" asked his new acquaintance. "I murdered the general," the first soldier replied. The second

soldier was incredulous. “How come I got thirty days for being AWOL and you got only three days for murdering the general?” he asked. “They are hanging me on Wednesday,” the condemned man answered.

Regardless of how positive our attitude toward life, if there is no overall meaning to life, if there is no energizing influence from within that will allow us to be victorious, then life is ultimately an absurdity. Without Jesus there is no hope, no help, no lasting happiness. Life is but a fleeting shadow with no substance and no staying power.

It is difficult for every person who tries to live without God. Is there no one there to notice me, no one there to care about me, no one there to help me cope with my life? For many people today the answer is “no one.” Without Jesus life is ultimately hopeless. Jesus is the source of life, abundant life, life with possibilities untold. Indeed Jesus is the only real hope of new life that we have, and how does this new life manifest itself? What does faith in Jesus really promise us? First of all, I think Jesus is rest for the weary; rest, that is what many of us crave. We are like the fellow who was having trouble getting up in the morning so his doctor prescribed some pills. The man took them, and he slept well and was awake before he heard the alarm. He took his time getting to the office, and he strolled in and said to his boss, “I didn’t have a bit of trouble getting up this morning.” “That’s fine,” replied the boss. “but where were you yesterday?”

It is rest that many of us crave, and in some cases that is what we need. But many others of us are more tired than we need to be. The source of our fatigue is mental and emotional. We come home from work, and we are exhausted. We hardly have energy to get out of the chair, and yet if someone had something really exciting for us to do - something active, something enjoyable - we would discover energy we never knew we had. Psychological and emotional conflicts drain energy from us. We need rest, not for our bodies, but for our souls. If our inner person could get it all together, we would have energy untold.

There is no greater energizer in the world than commitment to Jesus. When life is centered in his purposes, life has a new freshness. Read the story of St. Paul. Notice the energy bursting forth from this man as he encountered every obstacle to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. There is a great motivating force in life that gives more than rest to the weary. He is the source of life, energy, power; and Jesus is also, I think, the roadmap for the

wanderer. Are you a wanderer? Are you simply meandering through life with little direction or purpose? No fixed idea about what you are doing here. Does it puzzle you then why you seem to be accomplishing so little? I once heard that the problem with many people is that they are wandering generalities rather than meaningful specifics. And that's true. We wander, we dabble, we fritter life away with no great driving purpose. There needs to come a time in every person's life when he or she sits down and asks the question, "Why am I here? What is it that is really important in my life?"

A great businessman said that the secret of a success was that every morning he made a list of everything he had to do that day in the order of their importance. He started then with the most important task and stuck with it until he was finished. The problem with many of us is that we have never determined what is most important in our lives. We simply wander; we let happenstance control the events in our lives. We are like billiard balls on a pool table. We are bounced here and there, but we never really take control of our lives. Of course, some of us need a direction for our lives.

What a wonderful transformation we can experience if we allow Jesus to be our roadmap. You and I may not have wandered as far as some, but we are as much in need of God's guidance as anyone. That is one of the reasons daily prayer is important in the life of a Christian. Prayer is important not so much because it changes God. God is always loving. God always wills God's children good. There's nothing about God that needs to change. Prayer is important because it changes us. Prayer allows us to center our thoughts on the one who is the source of all life. With God's guidance we sort out what is really important in our lives. We discover God's will for us. We discover insight into how we might effectively accomplish that to which God has called us in this life.

For the weary, God is rest. To the wanderer, Jesus is a roadmap. And, finally, to the warrior, Jesus is relaxation. For many of us, and I put myself in this category, worry is the most destructive force in life. We worry because we have never entirely entrusted our life to God.

The late Norman Vincent Peale once told about a friend of his who coped in a marvelous way with long bout with a disease. Dr. Peale asked him, "At any time during this experience were you afraid?" "Yes," he replied, "there was one time when I was afraid. That was when my temperature stayed at one hundred four for three days. The thought crossed my mind that maybe I

wasn't going to make it. But I was afraid only temporarily. I just began to apply common sense as I did, so the fever went down. All the common sense I had told me that the doctors on this case were confident that they were doing the right thing." He added beyond that, "I was in good hands. When I board an airplane, I'm not afraid. I know the equipment is good. I know the plane is well serviced, that the pilots and engineers know their business. I don't sit there being afraid. I apply common sense to it. I am in a scientific universe."

"Well," Dr. Peale commented, "you're one man who doesn't seem to have fear in the slightest degree." "Why should I?" replied his friend, "I gave my mind - my whole being - to Jesus. He freed me from fear, and when you do that you don't need to be afraid of anything."

Many of us need to learn from this man. We need to let go of our worries about our health, about our finances, about our family situations. Jesus can free us from our fears. We don't need to be afraid of anything. Jesus is rest for the weary, a roadmap for the wanderer, relaxation for the warrior. Jesus never performed a funeral. Jesus specialized in resurrections. Jesus is life abundant, never ending, joy to overflowing life.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs.

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