

Life Is A Given
Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind Series
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Based on Luke 8:26–39

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As I was planning our summer worship services, I read through all of the upcoming gospel readings from Luke. I discovered a theme running through them. Jesus encounters all of these individuals that most people during his time would choose to avoid – widows, prostitutes, foreigners, tax collectors, etc. They were definitely not the “in crowd.” While others walk the other way, Jesus befriends such people and gives them a taste of God’s inclusive grace.

I thought it fitting, then, to focus my sermons over the next couple of months around the theme, “Close Encounters of the *Jesus Kind*.” Time and time again, Jesus goes out of his way to interact with these so called “outsiders.” I believe we can learn some important Christian truths by taking a closer look at these encounters.

In the gospel today, Jesus encounters a funeral procession. Most of us don’t like to talk about death. We tell jokes about death so that we don’t have to take it seriously. One of my favorite funnies about death is an obituary for a movie theater owner. It read: Martin Levine, owner of the local movie theater, has passed away at age 65. The funeral will be held on Thursday at 2:10, 4:20, 6:30, 8:40, and 10:50.

Death wasn’t a laughing matter for the widow in the gospel today. She is making her way to the cemetery to bury her only son. It’s a heart-wrenching situation. The fact that she is a widow means that she has already buried her husband. Now the woman travels the same cemetery road to bury her only son. This widow now finds herself all alone. I can’t even begin to imagine the magnitude of this woman’s grief. Some of you know her pain; you’ve been there before.

What would you say to the widow? Jesus tells the woman, “Don’t cry.” That sounds so insensitive to me. I would be more inclined to tell the woman to just let the tears come. After all, she has lost so much. But Jesus says to her, “Don’t cry.” Why would Jesus say such a thing?

I remember presiding over my very first funeral right out of seminary. I wanted to make sure that I did it right and so I read through the gospels to see how Jesus did funerals. You know what I found? Jesus didn’t do funerals – not even one! Jesus only did resurrections. What does that tell us?

It tells us that when Jesus is with us, life is a given. Remember Lazarus, who had been dead for **four** days? When Jesus shows up, even he comes back to life – after four days! When we are with Jesus, no matter how dire our circumstances, life is a given.

No matter what you are facing right now: sickness, employment issues, life passages, family tensions, financial burdens – whatever troubles your heart this day, Jesus comes to you and says, “Don’t cry. Don’t worry. Don’t lie awake another hour. It’s going to be OK, for I am with you.”

Because God has sent Jesus to be with us, a better tomorrow is a given. The things of this world that trouble us and tempt us, those things that frustrate us and break our heart – they will not have the last word in our lives. This is why, no matter what you are facing, Jesus can say to you with utmost certainty, “There’s no reason to cry, for I am with you. It’s going to be OK.”

Because Jesus is with us, a blessed life is a given. That’s the good news Jesus wants us to hear this day.

Can you imagine having to go through life without Christ? Without faith? One of the hardest things I have ever had to do as a pastor is to perform a funeral for a family who weren’t believers. When I asked them why they wanted me to bury their mother, their answer was, “Well, aren’t pastors the ones who do that?” As I sat with the family and planned their mother’s funeral, I realized the family had no hope that their mother was in a better place. I sensed no peace in their hearts. There the family sat, discouraged, defeated, feeling all alone in their grief.

That experience reminded me of a spiritual truth: life is hopeless without Christ. Without Christ, there is no purpose to life; without Christ, there is no hope in death. Life is hopeless without Christ.

In order for us to experience the hope and peace that God desires to give us, we have to allow our lives to be touched by the love of Jesus. Just as Jesus touches the coffin of the widow’s son in the gospel today and grants him new life, so Jesus approaches us. Jesus touches us and offers us the gift of new life.

Jesus touches us with the waters of Holy Baptism, claiming us as children of God. Jesus touches us with his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, offering us forgiveness and the promise of life eternal. Jesus touches us through the Holy Word of Scripture, through the embrace of a friend, through the line of a Christian hymn.

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus finds all kinds of ways to touch our daily lives. And through that touch of Jesus, the result is always the same: new life, renewed hope, restored faith. Through the life-giving touch of Jesus, we come to know that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.

A man was once traveling across the ocean on a ship with his young daughter. It was a difficult time because it had only been two weeks since he had buried his wife. The man was standing against the rail of the ship, looking out over the vast ocean. His young daughter asked him, “Daddy, does God still love us?” The man understood the pain in his daughter’s heart.

He picked her up in his arms, gave her a tight hug, and told her once again how God's love is forever and always. The father then pointed to the ocean and told his daughter, "God's love is as big as this ocean. Look across the ocean as far as you can," he told his daughter. "Look up and down and all around. God's love is wider than this ocean. God's love goes higher than the big blue sky; it's deeper than the deepest part of the ocean underneath us." The little girl thought about that for a moment and said, "And just think Daddy, we're right in the middle of it."

In many and various ways, we have experienced the healing touch of Jesus. Christ's willingness to reach out to us in our time of need has helped us realize that indeed we are right in the middle of God's love. God's love completely surrounds us – each and every moment of our lives – reminding us that it's going to be OK. "Don't cry," Jesus says. "I am here." Even in death, Jesus promises God's love will completely surround us.

Because we have encountered the powerful touch of Jesus, we now look at life differently. Difficult times become opportunities for us to trust in God's promises. Moments of human weakness become occasions for God to reveal his glory and power. Instead of seeing death as the end, it becomes the beginning of a new life in heaven.

Through the powerful touch of Jesus, we are given the strength we need to carry on, no matter what we are facing. Just as Jesus did for the widow in Nain, Jesus promises to meet us along the way and offer us guidance and hope amidst our concerns and struggles. When all seems hopeless, Jesus will show up and touch us with his healing hands and remind us that because we are a child of God, life is a given.

"Don't cry," Jesus says. "Don't worry. Don't lie awake another hour. It's going to be OK, for I am with you."

Thanks be to God!