

Pentecost 3, Proper 5, Year C, 060913  
All Saints Episcopal Church

"When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her..."

In the name of our God who creates us, redeems us, sustains us, and hopes for our wholeness. Amen.

There was some good news on the television this week. The last of the 250 hospitalized victims of the Boston Marathon got to go home - after 50 days there - a 29 year old woman who teaches at an Episcopal Pre-School near Baltimore, MD. She went home with one leg broken in several places and the other leg amputated at mid-thigh, and damaged eardrums from the sound of the bomb blast.

Her name is Erika, and she says that she remembers everything that happened to her that day. She was waiting in the crowd, watching for her mother to finish the marathon when everything seemed to go quiet. Then she says she saw flashes of orange and yellow, and remembers falling down to the ground. And then, she remembers having a conversation with God in her head. She told God she wasn't ready to go yet.

The next thing Erika knew, a woman came over to her and grabbed her hand and said, "I'm Joan, from California. I'm not going to let you go." Then Joan started screaming for people to come take care of Erika. She took off her belt and used it as a tourniquet on Erika's leg.

Joan had also been waiting near the finish line for family members when the bombs went off. Even though her leg was cut in several places and her eardrums ruptured, too, she went to help comfort the young woman on the ground until the paramedics came.

Erika has had 11 surgeries, but in the end lost one leg and a large chunk of her other leg is missing. But ever since the day of the bombing, Erika has been thinking of the woman who held her hand and wouldn't let it go. On a recent national network TV interview, she made a plea to find "Joan from California" in order to be able to thank her. She said, "I don't know if you're even watching, but Joan, I would love to find you and tell you thank you and give you a big hug."

Well, as things go in stories like this, someone saw a picture of the two women at the scene of the bombing, and recognized Joan. They got in touch with her and she contacted the network. "That's me in the picture," she wrote. The network flew her from California to Maryland and she and Erika met this past Wednesday.

At first, they were nervous, but then they began sobbing and embraced. Erika told 'Joan' that she had been terrified in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. "I had this horrible feeling I was going to die. I could sense something was really wrong." She continued, "Right away, you came right up to me and you grabbed my hand and you told me you weren't going to let go, and you didn't."

'Joan' responded, "I felt like there was a reason I was there. I felt a compulsion to go over to you." She went on, "I have thought about you every moment since the marathon. I didn't know how to get a hold of you. I didn't know what happened to you." She added, "Know that I'm always there for you. It never goes away. We're friends for life. I'm never going to stop holding your hand."

It's a God thing. Compassion. Healing. Grace.

Oh, and one more thing: Because apparently all the people near ground zero had hearing damage during the blast, Erika learned that she had mis-heard "Joan from California's" name. It's Amanda. But that's OK. Joan mis-heard, too. She thought Erika's name was Irene.

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There are many stories of healing in Luke's Gospel. Just last week we heard the story of Jesus healing the Centurion's slave in Capernaum. Today we pick up with another story of healing - which is found only in Luke - this time, a resurrection story in which Jesus brings to life a dead man on the way to be buried.

Jesus and the large crowd that has followed him from Capernaum are entering the town of Nain. You might imagine that they are a boisterous group - happy because of the miracle of healing that they have just experienced in Capernaum, excited at the prospect of learning more about this unusual man, and maybe hyped up about the road trip on which they find themselves.

But coming out of the gate to the town of Nain is another kind of procession altogether. It is a funeral procession. And a man wrapped in bands of cloth is being carried out on a litter while mourners and onlookers follow behind. It is a large

crowd, too, even though Nain is a small town. The dead man is the only son of his widowed mother. There is no other family. The grieving woman is now totally alone, and her life is threatened because of that.

The mother is now in double jeopardy. She had become a widow when her husband died, and that was hard enough, but she still had her son to lean on and to provide for her. Now she is childless. Now she is dependent on her neighbors to be kind to her and to give her some of what they might have leftover. Now she faces a life of uncertainty and financial hardship.

To be a widow during Jesus' time meant she had no power, no social standing. It was a world of, and for, and run by men. Women could only be represented in legal matters by men. Women could only be defended in social matters by men. If her property were to be attacked by greedy landowners or thieves, only her male kin could help her. According to the scriptures, she was to be protected since she was a widow, but there was no guarantee that religious laws would be upheld in the political world of men. So each step she takes toward the burial grounds is heavy with grief, heavy with fear, heavy with despair.

When the two processions pass by each other, the widow is consumed with sorrow. But Jesus is paying attention, and the sight of her moves him so much that he brings her son back to life. Let me repeat that: it is not compassion for the dead son, but for the widow, that draws Jesus to the funeral procession. She does not ask him for help. We know nothing about her faith. She never even speaks aloud according to the story. But Jesus sees her and has compassion on her, and in raising her son to life again, Jesus has given her a new life as well.

Now it's not unusual that Jesus' healing work affected more than just the person who was sick or had died. As he walked from town to town and saw crowds afflicted with sickness and disease, 'he had compassion on them.' When he saw the hungry, 'he had compassion on them,' healed the sick, and fed thousands at one time. When surrounded by another large crowd of lame, blind, crippled and mute folks, he told his disciples, 'I have compassion for these people.'

Perhaps the two most famous parables of scripture are also about compassion: the outsider, known as the Good Samaritan, in contrast to the 'insider' religious professionals, 'had compassion' on the man beaten by thugs; and while the prodigal

son was 'still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.'

My point is that, for Luke, healing, or resurrection, is not just the healing of a disease or the resuscitation of a dead body -- but it is the re-viving - the reinfusion of life - of a people and their communities in God's shalom. This story and the other healing stories are about grace - pure, unadulterated, undiluted, unbidden, unearned, un-asked-for grace. This raising from the dead doesn't happen because of a mother's faith, or her son's worthiness. It just happens because Jesus has compassion for her. Period.

The mother didn't have to act faithfully. The son didn't have to live gratefully. Maybe both of them were faithful and grateful. We'll never know. But the point is that grace requires nothing of us but choice - to receive it or not. Grace comes unbidden, when we don't expect it. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We can't beg for it. It just comes. What we can do is choose to receive it or reject it. The choice is always ours.