

Death doth pursue me all the way,
Nowhere I rest securely;
He comes by night, he comes by day,
And takes his prey most surely.
A failing breath, and I
In death's strong grasp may lie
To face eternity for aye.
Death dost pursue me all the way.

We sang this hymn last week during the distribution of communion. I learned this hymn as a child, and this stanza in particular always struck me. Death pursues us all the way. We live in our sinful bodies in a sinful world, and the wages of sin is death. It can come at any moment and at any age, at night or in broad daylight. It takes its prey most surely. One failing breath lands us in its strong grip, from which we can't possibly free ourselves. But the end of this stanza is what sticks out the most: "To face eternity for aye." As the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, "It is assigned for everyone to die once, and after that the judgment" (Heb 9:27). Death certainly does pursue us all the way.

But in our lesson from Luke's Gospel account this morning, we hear of another greater pursuit. Yes, death pursues us all the way. But Christ our Lord pursues death. Jesus went to the town of Nain. He came near the gate of the town. He saw a dead man being carried out in an open coffin. He saw the young man's mother. He saw that she was a widow and that the young man was her only son. He saw the large crowd with her. He saw death. And he pursued it. He set his scope on death to take it down.

Our Lord's pursuit of death is his compassion for those who grieve death. He felt sorry for her. We need to stop and consider this sorrow Jesus felt. It wasn't just a passing feeling of pity. No, he was moved inside. His inner parts turned. He literally knew and felt her pain. This gets to the heart of how Christ pursues death. He feels, in his own body and his own soul, the sting of death. He who knows no sin became sin for us, carrying on himself and in himself the burning wrath against our sin. As Jesus would say right before his death, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death." He gives his life up – that is, not only his body, but his soul – into the torture of the cross. He sets himself on the altar as the holy and spotless victim, as a pleasing aroma to God, to turn away God's anger. In this way, he would die to sin, die to the world, and die to death.

And this death of our Lord was no accident. He wasn't just pushing us out of the way of a bus and taking the hit for us with no time to avoid his own demise. Neither was this a suicide, as if our Lord came up with this on his own. No, he willingly walked to his death, carrying his own cross, but he did so in obedience to his Father's plan, which was set from before the foundations of the world. Jesus was not trapped by death, even though this appeared to be the case to friends and enemies alike. As his own mother sat at the feet of his cross, he continued to speak with resolute and determined kindness and compassion, providing for her even in his dying breath.

Our Lord's death was a pursuit of death itself. The predator has become the prey. Death is swallowed up by death, and the sting of sin, which stood as a record against us, is cancelled.

Our Lord's compassion for the weeping widow is the same compassion that drove him to the cross. It's the same compassion by which he, risen from the dead, pleads for us at the Father's right hand. It is the same compassion by which he speaks to us even today through his gospel.

So with that same compassion, he spoke to that woman: “Don’t cry.” Only his words can accomplish what they set out to do. His words do not return empty. And this is why his words speak what no one would dream of speaking in such a situation. Who would tell a grieving mother to stop crying? Only he who knows her every pain, who is innocent and pure from every stain of sin but feels the shame and guilt and fear that dwell deeply within our hearts. Only the Lord of life, the Joy of all desiring, the precious Treasure from heaven, can say, “Stop weeping.” Because such words flow from the authority of God himself. They flow from the atoning suffering and death of God’s Son. They pour out from his lifeblood shed on the cross, and they radiate from the power of his resurrection. These words give comfort even when the water continues to flow from your face, and these words will finally wipe away every tear from your eyes.

After speaking these words to that grieving mother, Jesus then set his eyes on death. He continued his pursuit. He reached out his hand and touched the coffin. The Law of Moses said that anyone who touched a dead body would be unclean until evening. But not Jesus. He is the end and fulfillment of the law. He remains clean and pure even in death. Even as he bears the sin and guilt of the whole world, he remains the spotless Lamb of God. His touch therefore stops death dead in its tracks. He has death cornered so it can’t turn to the right or the left. He then opens his mouth again and, with the rod of his mouth, delivers death its final blow. He speaks. He addresses the son caught in the shackles of death. He doesn’t address death, as if death has its own personality. No, he addresses the mother’s son. He says, “Young man, I tell you, wake up.”

I tell *you*! Jesus speaks to the man. He doesn’t speak to death. Death is the enemy. But death has already been sentenced. There is nothing more to say to death other than to mock its loss of power. He doesn’t tell death to do anything. Instead, the devil, who keeps us enslaved by the fear of death, must sit helplessly by and watch our Lord address his dear lamb. And Jesus speaks to the man as if he isn’t even dead. He’s just sleeping, and he needs to wake up.

The young man got up and began to speak. This is why God gives us life on earth. It so that we would confess his name. Oh, blest the hour whenever to Him our thoughts can speed. Soon years on earth are past; but time we spend expressing the love of God brings blessing that will forever last! As Psalm 118 says, “I will not die, but I will live and declare the deeds of the Lord.” And so the young man begins to speak. What does he say? He says whatever his Lord, who just gave him life, gives him to say. That is the Christian life, both in this valley of tears as well as in heaven.

Finally, Jesus gave the young man to his mother. This teaches us that our children do not belong immediately to us. They belong to God. He gives them to us for the time he has appointed. Children are a heritage from the Lord, and he gives us all life through his life, death, and resurrection.

When the people saw this, they were amazed. Fear fell upon all of them. But this wasn’t the old fear of death and condemnation. This wasn’t that binding power of terror, used by the devil to keep us away from trusting God. When we must face death, we often feel the terror. But Christ, who pursues and conquers sin and the grave, has replaced this slavish fear with true, childlike fear of God. And those who fear the Lord will not lack anything.

This past week, our dear sister in Christ, three month old Vivienne, died. It seems that death caught her too early. But death didn’t get to her first. No, her Lord pursued her long before death had its sights set on her. God planned her salvation from before the foundations of the world. He chose her in Christ.

And we can know this from listening to the words of our Savior. It is in his Word that we have the assurance that death has lost its sting. As Vivienne and all those who were baptized into Christ were baptized also into his death, so we can know that we will share in his resurrection. This is our comfort at all times, even as death pursues us. Let death pursue. Christ has made it no more than a puppy chasing a car. Christ our Lord has sought us out. Those who hear his voice and believe will not be put to shame. Let us pray:

Since Christ hath full atonement made
And brought to us salvation,
Each Christian therefore may be glad
And build on this foundation.
Thy grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,
Thy death is now my life indeed,
For Thou hast paid my ransom. Amen.