

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

God of the Living - November 10, 2019

Luke 20:27-38

The question of resurrection. For Christians, this is the heart of everything we do. It is the core of why we exist as a church. Resurrection is who we are, what we are, why we are. If there is no resurrection, we, in the words of Paul, are “the most to be pitied” because we have staked our lives on nothing.

In my time as a pastor, I have presided at over 300 funerals. Many of them were in Zambia, Africa, where almost every week a helped bury someone who was a victim of HIV/AIDS. Of course, in Zambia no one actually died of HIV. That term was culturally forbidden. Instead, people spoke of the deceased dying of “the usual” disease.

I have led funerals and memorial services, or as we prefer to say, “Celebrations of Witness to the Resurrection” in the United States as well, the most recent being a week ago Saturday. At each and every one of these services, I read scripture, I offered a meditation on the meaning of life and death in Christ, and then I concluded each service with the words “Receive him or her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.”

When I am asked to attend a committal, either at an earth burial or mausoleum service, I always pray, “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother/sister.”

I have officiated at many funerals, both of persons whose friends and family are mostly believers in God as well as those who are not. Needless to say, I much prefer presiding at the funerals of believers. Perhaps you’ve been to a variety of funerals and perhaps you can tell the difference between the funerals of those whose family and friends are believers and the funerals of persons whose friends and family are not.

Quite frankly, the atmosphere between the two is very, very different. At a funeral of believers, there is sorrow, to be sure. The wife or husband, children, family, and friends, are certainly sad. Many times, when I have the opportunity to meet with the families of the deceased, I always tell them that it’s OK to cry. Some almost seem to want or need that “permission” to express their feelings.

Let us not pretend. Death is sad. Death is difficult. Death turns our lives upside down. To not be sorrowful about the death of someone we care deeply about is to be somehow less than human. We should be sad, we should be confused, we should even cry or feel like crying. Jesus cried when he heard about the death of his friend Lazarus. I have no doubt that when Jesus died alone on the cross, the few women who were there as witnesses cried horribly, especially Jesus’ own mother, Mary. How could she not?

But at the funerals of those whose friends and family are mostly non-believers, the scene is quite the opposite. No, I'm not saying that the friends of family of non-believers are indifferent to death, but rather they have no idea about what has happened to the deceased. Death is a great mystery. Someone close to them is gone yet they have no idea how to respond. Honestly, I have little idea on how to minister to such people because to do so, I would need to attempt to explain the entire Christian story, not just from Jesus, but from Adam and Eve. In the few minutes we have together, that's virtually impossible to do, although there are always some who wish I'd try.

We who are people of faith. We who believe that Jesus not only died a horrible, painful, humiliating death on a cross outside of Jerusalem yet also experienced something called resurrection. In resurrection he had a physical body that was capable of not only touching and being touched, eating, talking, and walking; but also able to appear and disappear at will. Jesus selected to whom and when he would appear. Moreover, as Christians we believe that because Jesus was resurrected into a new and familiar, yet unfamiliar body, the rest of us believers also can be resurrected as well. Jesus was merely the first. He will not be the only one to experience resurrection. You may notice that I conclude our weekly worship with the words, "Jesus walks beside us every step of the way through this journey we call life ... and the next." In other words, Christians believe at the heart of their faith that the death of our physical bodies is not the end of our relationship with God. There is a part two. There is something that happens after the funeral, after the burial, after the repast. Those whom we love may be gone from the earth, but they are not gone forever.

Non-believers have no such assurance, no such understanding. When we die, we are gone. There is no continuing life with God. There is nothing to hold onto. There is no sure and certain hope of anything. Just a collection of flesh and bone that once held a human being. That's it. All over.

Thus without the hope of resurrection, without the faith of believing that death does not have the final say in life, what is left? Nothing but anger, uncertainty, and yes, a shocking, stark attempt to grab the material assets of the deceased and spread blame among the immediate friends and family. I've led far too many funerals of non-believers where I know full well that after my part is finished, the real war begins: over money, over blame, over who loved who the most. I expect some of you have witnessed such fights and frankly, I'm glad to get out of there. I comfort myself, when I conduct such funerals, with the thought at least one, perhaps more, of the mourners is a believer and I can preach and offer comfort to them.

So in today's scripture, Jesus deals directly with the question of resurrection. It is somewhat ironic as he knew quite well that he was on his way to Jerusalem to have his own confrontation with the religious and secular authorities, He knew he would be facing not only his own crucifixion but also

trusting in his own hope that he would indeed be resurrected somehow as he told his disciples on multiple occasions.

In this passage, is Jesus at odds with a group in the Jewish tradition called the Sadducees. After more than 1000 years of following their God, many Jews concluded that there had to be something called a resurrection. If indeed God is a God of love and if indeed God is a God of justice, such love and justice was seldom evident on the earth. Jews, among so many, were far too often the victims of injustice, hatred, and suffering. All this suffering is quite contrary to the vision of the world God offered in the Ten Commandments. Many Jews concluded that resurrection had to be part of the plan of a genuine God of justice. The victims of injustice would receive a proper reward for their suffering and the perpetrators of injustice would, in their resurrection, receive the punishment they were due.

It is certainly no coincidence that many of the supporters of the Sadducees, who rejected the idea of resurrection, were wealthy people and leaders of the religious establishment people who, after all, were often the oppressors of regular folks. If there was a resurrection so God could reward the oppressed and punish the oppressors, the Sadducees knew full well that they would be among those being punished. So of course they hoped there was no such thing as a resurrection because for them resurrection was very bad news.

Thus when they had the opportunity to challenge Jesus about the resurrection, they did. They asked a ridiculous question about a woman who, by custom, was married in turn to seven brothers because the Law demanded widows remarry a brother of her dead husband to insure the family would continue and the wealth remain within the family. They asked the question about whose husband she would be in heaven since all seven had an equal claim on her.

As usual, Jesus turns such secular questions upside down. In resurrection as on earth, the one relationship that matters first is not with one's wife or husband, but with God. We all have seen plenty of TV shows and movies that focus on the afterlife. They mostly present a version of the afterlife or heaven which is just an extension of what has happened on earth. It's kind of cute, but it's not what Jesus taught.

On the contrary, when speaking about what happens after we die, Jesus tells us only two things: First, death is not the end. Second, eternal life is all about our continuing relationship with God. Precisely what happens, Jesus does not say, but he assures us we continue to exist as individuals, each known and loved by the God who made us.

All he tells the Sadducees is that the Old Testament scriptures themselves attest to life after death. Jesus cited the passage in Exodus that when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, God stated that God is, not was, is, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If God is the God of the first

three patriarchs of Israel, not was, but is, God is the therefore the God of you and of me and of everyone who has gone before us and will come after us. While our physical lives on this earth will come to an end, our spiritual existence with our God and creator will never end.

Perhaps you were hoping that I could tell you today exactly what happens after we die. I would be a liar and doing you a profound disservice if I made such a claim. Rather I stake my faith and my ability to stand in front of you weekly and at various funeral congregations, on my personal belief that resurrection is real. I could not stand here if I didn't believe that something happens after we die.

Why do I believe? There are many reasons, but two stand out for me. First, the original witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were women and women only. In those days the testimony of women was not considered reliable. Yet the early church proudly asserted that the testimony of women was part of the proof they needed to show that Jesus was somehow alive after being killed. Second, I believe because that first generation of believers, the ones who actually saw and heard Jesus all insisted that his resurrection was very real. Among that first generation of witnesses, all of Jesus' original disciples and hundreds more who followed died, often horribly, insisting to the end that Jesus was real and his resurrection was real. Why would they die for a lie? As Charles Colson, convicted in the Watergate scandal and later a Presbyterian minister put it, "I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

Every day, I see and experience evidence of our Living God and God's work on this earth. In the words of Job, a man well acquainted with pain and suffering, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth." Because God is real and because God is love, death cannot interrupt our permanent relationship with God. For now and forever, we are alive with God in Jesus Christ. Resurrection is true and I trust in God to make it so.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.