

Sermon for November 10, 2019
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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."

Today's Gospel is one of many in which some group of Jewish religious leaders – rabbis, priests, or religious scholars; Pharisees, Saducees, or Herodians – try to put Jesus to the test and trip him up.

This time it was the Saducees who went after him – those were the people who were closely involved with sacrificial worship in the temple.

Some of the Jews in Jesus' day, like the Pharisees, believed that God will raise the dead back to life.

The Saducees didn't – they thought we have this earthly life, and then we die, and that's the end of us.

And the Saducees have this clever scholarly argument against the resurrection, really almost a trick question, which they're using to try to trap Jesus and make him look foolish.

Here's how it went:

There was a Jewish law, that if a married man died childless, his brother should marry the widow and sire a child for his dead brother so he would have someone to carry on his name.

OK, let's suppose there are seven brothers.

The oldest one marries a woman, but then he dies before they have any children,

so the second brother marries her, then *he* dies... and then the third one... and so on ...until the poor woman has married the whole family, lost seven husbands, and eventually dies childless herself.

Now, let's assume (as Jesus and Pharisees do) that there *is* a resurrection: the resurrected wife had seven husbands in life, but of course only one at a time.

Now all eight of them are brought back to life in the resurrection.

Which one going to be her husband?

Or are all seven going to be her husbands?

Judaism might have had a time of polygamy – Abraham had two wives, Solomon had hundreds – but never a woman with multiple husbands!

Polygamy....maybe. Polyandry....a woman with more than one husband....that's crazy talk!

This is what philosophers call a *reductio ad absurdum* – if your view leads to *this* conclusion, it's got to be wrong.

It is, frankly, the kind of argument that people in my line of work – philosophy – might make.

You believe X....and X implies Y....well, Y is absurd....so there must be something wrong in the assumptions that got you there.

Good, intellectually respectable, kind of argument.

How does Jesus respond?

He does three things.

First, he *does* offer some arguments in return – the kind of arguments the Saducees would respect, based on what Moses said about Abraham.

But then he goes deeper: he points out that their basic assumptions are wrong:

when people rise from the dead, they're going to be in a totally different state from the kind of life we know today.

They aren't going to be married at all – they'll be “like the angels”.

And in this, he does a third thing that is commented on in other Gospel passages:

He speaks as someone who has authority, and not just in the wrangling arguments of the religion scholars.

You *can* argue about theology based on the things we know in this life – from experience, from science – but this is just from a human perspective, and our knowledge and our perspective is limited.

God knows things that we don't know, because we're not in a position to experience them or test them out.

And clearly one of the foremost of those things, and maybe the one that we care about most, is what's going to happen to us after we die.

The only way a human being could know the answer is by dying and seeing what happens next – and none of us is in a position to know that – at least not yet – and if we do find out after we die, we can't come back and share what we've learned with everybody else.

From the Christian perspective, there is only one person in history who really knew what's going to happen after we die: Jesus.

And that is because we Christians believe that he was not just a man, but also God incarnate.

He was in a position to say things about this issue that neither the Saducees, nor the Pharisees, nor anyone else is able to say.

Of course, if you think he's just some bumpkin from Galilee, no reason to pay attention.

But if you think he is the Son of God, the one who was with the Father in the Beginning, and will come back at the Last Day and bring about the Resurrection, that's a whole different story.

But really the central point is this: there *is* going to be a resurrection of the dead, and that's really important.

In fact, it's the central proclamation of the Christian faith, our Easter proclamation: The Lord is Risen.

Without that belief, there wouldn't have been any Christianity in the first place.

And if you believe Jesus rose from the dead, and that he promised to raise US from the dead, you have to believe that he'll be true to his word.

But what's it going to be like?

Maybe your main worry isn't who you'll be married to, but you might well wonder about what it's going to be like in one way or another.

In fact, Christians have their own disagreements about this.

Some Christians think that, after we die, we'll go to Heaven; and some of the people who believe this also think we won't have bodies at all, but be immaterial spirits.

Others believe that we'll be raised back to life in our bodies when Jesus returns some time in the future.

And indeed some think that both are true – when Jesus returns to Earth, we'll be raised in new bodies, but in-between, we'll be with him in some disembodied state.

There are real questions here.

Is it embodied or disembodied?

If it's disembodied, what the heck is THAT like?

If it's embodied, what are those bodies like? Will we still feel pain? Will we feel hungry and eat and drink? Will we still be married to the people we were married to in life?

Jesus does answer one question – we're not going to be married.

But he doesn't answer all the other questions we might want to ask.

The rest of the Bible doesn't either – or rather the answers it gives are disappointingly unclear or ambiguous.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says we'll be "like the angels".

Ah....I get it....I'm going to be like an angel!

Oh, wait.....what are angels like?

I don't have any idea, and the Bible frankly doesn't tell us much about them, either.

Maybe when you think of angels you picture glowing ethereal people with wings – but that's not from the Bible. That's just something we see in paintings and stained glass windows that artists have imagined.

And even if that *is* how angels appear, it doesn't tell us much about what it would be like to be like an angel.

If we're curious about just what angels are like, or what we will be like after we die, the Bible doesn't do much to answer that curiosity.

And from this I can only conclude that God didn't think it was important for us to understand such things in this life – indeed, maybe he even thought it wasn't something we should spend our time worrying about at all.

But there *is* something here that clearly **IS** very important: we **WILL** be resurrected – raised back to life when Christ returns.

Why is it important?

Well, clearly, it will be important **THEN** – after I die.

I'd much rather exist than not exist, and I'm sure most of you would too.

But it also makes a big difference here and now, while we're still in the midst of life, and may still have many years left to live.

Think how different your attitude about everything would be depending on what you believe about this: when you die, is that the end?

If you think this life is all there is, it makes sense to enjoy this life, in all its earthly ways, as much as you can.

It makes sense to put off death as long as possible – maybe even if that means sacrificing moral principles.

If you think this earthly life is all you've got, you'll probably want to live life to its fullest and cheat death for as long as you can.

But if you think that death is not the end, and that you will go on forever, that is a very different thing.

But there are further questions about just what kind of thing it is.

Suppose it means you go on just as you are now, or the way you are at the moment of your death.

Suppose your life is a total horrible mess. What would it be to go on *like that* forever?

That would be Hell.

Or maybe you're a pretty good person by the world's standards, things are going well for you, and you're reasonably happy much of the time, but you also secretly carry around a lot of guilt and shame, and a bunch of character flaws – maybe you're perpetually greedy, selfish, bitter, angry, anxious, or afraid.

Going on forever like that would probably be Hell too.

When I say "hell", forget Dante's Inferno, with people standing on their heads in lakes of fire.

Even without the fire, if you were to spend eternity consumed by negative emotions like hatred, greed, pride, shame, and guilt, that would be hell enough.

In fact, suppose you had this choice:

Choice 1: you can be a virtuous, loving person with a clear conscience, but you have to spend forever standing on your head in a flaming lake.

Choice 2: you live in a palatial paradise, but you're continually consumed by things like guilt, fear, jealousy, and hatred.

Which would you choose?

That's more or less the kind of question a philosopher like Plato poses: is it better to be a virtuous person in bad circumstances or a bad person with good circumstances?

But that's not the choice Jesus presents us with.

Jesus offers us something better than either of these choices.

He offers us forgiveness of our sins, a transformation of our character from sinful people afflicted by sin and shame and guilt into adoption as God's own sons and daughters, and eternal life with Him in paradise.

I have no idea what paradise is like – except that it's a life led in the presence of God and in the loving company of God and other sanctified souls.

THAT is what the resurrection is.

THAT is what Jesus invites us to.

THAT is what Jesus died on a cross and rose from the grave so that we might enjoy.

Sisters and brothers, God does not tell us all the things we might like to know – or at least does not do so yet.

But if we believe that God loves us, we must believe he has told us the things we NEED to know.

And the most central of these is this: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And not just existence in the tormented state we live in now – much less the torments of the damned – but eternal life with him and one another, transformed into his image and likeness through divine love, growing from glory unto glory.

We are created mortal beings. We can be raised up as spiritual beings.

We *can* be raised up as spiritual beings – it is not automatic.

Eternal life is life in union with God.

But God does not force this union upon us.

He OFFERS it freely.

Indeed, he died on a cross to offer it as a free gift.

We cannot achieve it for ourselves.

All we can do is accept the free gift that is offered.

Or we can reject it, or simply let the opportunity pass us by.

If you have already accepted it, rejoice and live into it, growing from glory unto glory.

Spread the Good News to everyone you know!

If you have slipped, or your affections have grown cold, repent and stir yourself up.

If you have never accepted it...the offer is still there....the free gift is still sitting on the table waiting for you to take it and open it up.

Jesus said "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, I will enter and make my home with them."

Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart today.

He may have been knocking for a very long time.

All you have to do is say "Yes, come in – come in to the home of my heart. Set it in order, and be master of the house."

I do not pretend it is an easy thing to say "yes" to that offer.

Yet it is the *only* thing.

"I *am* the resurrection and the life," says the Lord.

"Come to me, you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

"Come to me, and I will give you living waters."

Do not be like the Saducees, who cared more about theological wrangling than eternal life.

Jesus stands at the door and knocks.

The only question is this....will you let him in?