

Resurrection: “I Don’t Know”

A reflection on life after death

Luke 20:27-38
College Hill Presbyterian Church

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 10, 2019

Here we are, just three weeks before the Season of Advent, and for some reason the lectionary has selected, from the Gospel of Luke, a discussion about resurrection. Yet take careful note, this is not the usual discussion about Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning. Rather, it's about the resurrection of people – us – from the dead.

There are probably as many different understandings of what life after death is like as there are people. It's a question I am often asked as a pastor. I suspect that parents are also confronted with the inevitable, “What happens to people when they die?” Well, take a deep breath and relax into your pew, this is going to take a bit longer than my usual 15-minute sermon.

Most of you have probably attended a funeral or memorial service that I have led. I address this complex and mysterious issue this way. First, during the opening sentences before the Call to Worship, I quote, among other short passages of scripture, the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 14:8, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.” Later in the service, during the reading of scripture, I often quote Paul again, this time from 2 Corinthians 5:1, using the beautifully poetic imagery, “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Within what I entitle, “Words in Witness To Our Faith,” I remind ourselves of the promise found in Romans 8:39, also from Paul, that “nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.” And I add: Not even death. I then say something along the lines, “**Death does not have the final word, that there is life beyond life. Though no one knows for sure what that new life will be like, our hope rests in the belief that it is a life spent eternally in the loving Presence of God.**” And depending on the particular gathered group of folks at any given memorial service, I sometimes add the warning to be cautious if you hear anyone speculate beyond that.

So, here's how I would summarize my understanding. **Is there life after death, what the New Testament refers to as resurrection? Yes. What will it be like? I don't know. Period.** Too many pastors and preachers fear not giving members of their community of faith specific answers. They believe that's what their congregation expects. So, sometimes they, and others, try to come up with answers to common and understandable questions like:

- Will we be with our loved ones again?
- Will we have a physical body?
- Will it be here on earth or somewhere else?
- What is heaven like?
- Is there a hell?
- What happens if our physical body has been destroyed?
- What is a spiritual body?

- Will we even be ourselves, with the same personality and knowledge as when we were alive?
- Will we simply return to some kind of cosmic spiritual soup?

For these and all other questions about life after death, we must be honest with ourselves and realize we simply do not know. From a pastoral perspective, however, if a grieving member of a family shares with me what it is they believe about what's going to happen to their loved one who is now in heaven, that's not the time to have an in-depth theological discussion.

Additionally, there are many who indeed believe that there is no life after death, that this life is all there is. This was the conclusion of former religion professor at the University of Tulsa, the Rev. Dr. Harold Hill. In fact, he instructed me to not even mention the word 'resurrection' at his memorial service. Who knows, he and others may be correct. But again, my understanding as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is that we live into the hope that whatever eternity is like, it will be spent in the loving Presence of God.

But on this day, we're presented with something more, not the words of Paul, but perhaps a direct teaching from Jesus about the reality of our own resurrection. The gospel writer Luke presents it in the form of a controversy story. Let's take a look.

To begin with, it is important in the understanding of this passage to keep in mind that the question posed about the resurrection came not from bereaved persons seeking hope, or from believers searching for more clarity on the doctrine. Rather, Jesus is being interrogated by the **Sadducees**, persons who already were fixed in their position that **there was no resurrection of the dead**. The Sadducees are only mentioned this one time in Luke. They were one of the several religious/political parties within Judaism at that time. We don't know much about them because none of their writings survived, but there are a few things we do know.

Sadducees were of the priestly class, most of them aristocratic and wealthy. They were the governing class; they were theologically conservative; they believed in unrestricted free-will; and they regarded as normative in their religion only the five books of Moses, known as the Pentateuch, the Torah, which are the first five books of our Old Testament. And because there is no explicit reference to, or doctrine of the resurrection in those five books of the Bible, they didn't believe in life after death. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed there was an oral as well as a written tradition from Moses, and within that oral tradition was the basis for the belief in the resurrection. It was a subject of heated debate between the two parties.

So, in their classic "gotcha" style of "what if" questions, the Sadducees bait Jesus to see where he stands on this issue, hoping to either get an upper hand on the Pharisees, or to turn the crowd against Jesus. The question that is posed is in the form of a seemingly complex riddle that contains an absurd scenario - the deaths of seven brothers who all marry the same woman but remain childless by her. **The Sadducees ask Jesus, "in the resurrection," (which, remember, they don't believe in anyway) "whose wife will the woman be?"**

Before we look at Jesus' clever answer, here's a bit more background. There was an ancient Hebrew law described in the book of Deuteronomy, called levirate marriage. The name comes from the Latin *levir*, meaning "husband's brother" or brother-in-law. The law provided for the remarriage of a widow to the brother of a husband who dies childless. The purpose of the remarriage was to provide descendants

to carry on the deceased husband's name and inheritance. It was also meant to provide support for the widow now and in her old age. Let us not overlook, however, that women were being treated as property, whose primary purpose was to provide the man with children and heirs.

The Sadducees made this old Hebrew custom the basis for an argument. They take it to the point of being ridiculous: it happening seven times. (As an aside, if we were to turn this passage of scripture into a Broadway musical, what would we call it? I suggest we might call it 'One Bride for Seven Brothers.')

The question assumed that the idea of resurrection involves sexual reunion with one's earthly partner, or partners.

Jesus, presents a twofold answer to the riddle. What Jesus teaches is **resurrection of the dead encompasses both continuity and discontinuity from life now**. The first part of Jesus' response is that it is not legitimate to project earthly conditions into the future age to come. Jesus said, in effect, that we must not think of heaven in terms of this earth. Life there will be quite different, because we will be quite different. In this world we are faced with the reality of death. Therefore, the future of the human race is sustained by procreation - having children. Beyond the resurrection, however, there is no more dying and thus no more need for the same type of sexual relationships that now pertain. Jesus' point is simply that **God's future cannot be understood as an extension of our present existence. It is not the case that we can take what we like out of our current life, raise it to the nth degree, and call it heaven.**

From a 2000-year old biblical perspective (and remember that it's 2000 years old), resurrection is not simply a mirror of life here. Or to put it bluntly, it is not simply the resuscitation of corpses. Resurrection entails transformation, a discontinuity from how we experience life here and now.

So, having dismissed the basis for the Sadducees' question, Jesus turns to the root of their question: the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus moves from discontinuity to continuity. He cleverly grounds the teaching of resurrection in the writings accepted by the Sadducees themselves - the Law of Moses. Jesus calls their attention to the familiar story in Deuteronomy of Moses and the burning bush. Luke reports, "Moses speaks of the Lord as saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (v. 37). The argument is based on the present tense verb "am". The logic hinges on the saying and the belief that God is "**God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all are alive.**" Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, therefore, are experiencing a continuous life with God. They must be, in some sense, alive to God or in God.

Yet, Jesus' questioners, as well as us today, might be left still wondering how, where, and in what form people will be alive in the resurrection. But, unfortunately, no further explanation is given. But note, **the response in no way echoes the orthodox traditional church's tendency to make resurrection for people depend upon Jesus' resurrection.** In this story, Jesus has not died yet. Resurrection, therefore, is simply part of who God is.

Scripture, without giving us the details or even trying to prove resurrection, tells us that it is a glorious new mode of existence. It has discontinuity from life as we know it here and now, yet continuity in God, the One who transcends death. **To be sure, the themes of discontinuity and continuity does not satisfy our curiosity as we wonder about the particulars of life in the resurrection. We simply cannot say what it will be like.**

Biblical commentator William Barclay wrote nearly 70 years ago, "It would save a mass of misdirected ingenuity, and not a little heartbreak, if we **ceased to speculate on what**

heaven is like and left things to the love of God." The fact is that Jesus said so little about the subject. And many scholars question to what extent the words attributed to Jesus (in verses 34-36) may actually been shaped or altered by early Christian debates about marriage, sex, and childbearing.

In the end, it may be best just to recognize the mystery of the unknown and the limitations of our understanding. Yet, as many of us have witnessed as we've watched loved ones pass away, **accompanying the hope of life beyond this life we also have found hope in the face of death itself.** Perhaps one of the primary points being made by Jesus and Paul is simply that **death need no longer hold terror for us.** Or as Jesus Seminar scholar and retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong writes in his book, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, "I say my prayerful yes...Yes to life after death - because one who has entered a relationship with God has entered the timelessness of God." I will go further out on a heretical theological limb by declaring that every human ever born fits into this characterization. For all have a relationship with God, whether they recognize or acknowledge it, or not. Spong concludes his book, and I this sermon, with a helpful perspective:

I will never again seek to speculate on the nature of life after death, the definition of heaven, or the arguments for or against its reality. Those books on life after death that I read in my earlier life will remain in a row on a shelf in my library. I will not open them again.

I will treasure those persons with whom my life is emotionally bound today, and I will enjoy the expanding privileges of their friendship. When they die, I will grieve at the loss that my life will experience. **I will not speculate on how, if, or in what form I might see them again. That is not my business.**

My business is to live now, to love now, and to be now. As I give my life, my love, and myself away now, I hope that others can be called into deeper life, greater love, fuller being, and that by expanding each other, we enter the infinity of what Paul Tillich called "the eternal now."

To live it, not explain it, is my task and, I believe, the task of the Christ in this world and therefore the task of that group of people who dare to call themselves the body of Christ...

I will live in expectant hope that where [Christ] is there will I someday be. That is quite enough for me.

Amen.