

"The Question About Resurrection"

Luke 20:27-38; II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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It's the fall of the year. Some of us of a certain age learned this song in elementary school:

*"Softly, softly floating down, red and green and gold and brown,
in the country in the town, falling autumn leaves."*

It's fall in Jesus' earthly ministry in today's Gospel. The crowds shouting "Hosanna!" are silent, displaced by voices which challenge and confront Jesus' authority. Their chilling skepticism is prelude to their plans to kill him.

For some of us, it's fall in our lives. The years that are gone outnumber the years that remain. We are "Generation Next," the next to die and we wonder, "What's ahead?"

So on this All Saints Sunday, as we speak aloud the names of those who have died since the last All Saints, and remember in our hearts those who have gone in the years before, who are part of that "great cloud of witnesses" in a realm where there is no more pain or crying or tears anymore, I want to address "The Question About Resurrection."

The question most of us have is "Is it true?" Is there a place called "heaven," a place beyond death, a place of eternal life with God. Luke's face-off between Jesus and the Sadducees is the "yes" of Christian faith to the "no" of non-believers.

Before we jump down the Sadducees collective throats, we need to admit their viewpoint is not always so far away from some of us. We say things like *"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die."* *"Nothing is certain but death and taxes."* *"We are only two generations away from being forgotten."* *"One life is all you get – make the most of it."*

The Sadducees were not stupid men. They were aristocratic religious leaders, part of the priestly class in the first century: in other words, clergy, in particular clergy schooled in religious law. That law included levirate marriage. If you were a single man and your married brother died

and left a widow, you were obligated to marry her. This was for her legal protection, since widows had no legal rights; and to raise heirs if the woman was of child-bearing age.

So from their knowledge of the law and their opinion that resurrection was a lot of hooey, they raise an outlandish, hypothetical question. *“Jesus, a woman married and buried her husband and six of his brothers; in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?”*

Jesus responds in three ways. First, relationships change: they change in this life and in the world to come. We are tempted to think we know who will be “in” and “out” of heaven. There is the story of the pastor who died, went to heaven, and waited in the reception area. After some time there was a commotion at the main gate, a blaring of trumpets, a chorus of heavenly voices and bells: and Heaven’s gates opened wide to immediately receive a small and unimposing person.

The pastor, still waiting far longer than he thought he should, was finally admitted by an angel into heaven. The pastor couldn’t help himself. *“Why the long wait? I was a faithful United Methodist pastor my entire adult life. The other man seemed unremarkable. Who was he?”*

The angel replied, *“He was a New York City cabdriver. “A **cabdriver**?”* repeated the astonished preacher. *“A **New York City** cabdriver,”* emphasized the angel. *“You see, pastor, we work on results. While you preached, people slept. While he drove, people prayed.”*

But back to the Sadducees critique. I do believe we will recognize our loved ones in heaven, by their spirit rather than by physical appearance. As Jesus said, they are “like angels.” And I do trust God that the relationship we have with one another in heaven is one of peace and blessedness, which will be sorted out by God. That’s why we call it “faith.”

Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees also says that despite changes in appearance and relationship, not even death will separate us from being children of God. Stories, books and movies abound describing what are called “life after life” experiences. My late father, a man by no means disposed to fanciful notions, would speak in hushed yet confident tones of experiencing the presence of my mother who pre-deceased him by five years. And he talked with her, he told us, every day after she died.

Throughout my ministry I have had so many people tell me of receiving a “sign” that their loved one was okay that one would have to be a mighty doubter to discredit them all. These were, and are, people of different ages, cultures, faith-backgrounds and family upbringings, yet were universal in their belief that they were given a comforting sign by those no longer on earth.

And then there was Ben, who died at age 12 over 25 years ago, the only son of my high school friend. As I traveled to Maryland on the cold February morning of his funeral, I saw geese soar out of sight. At the funeral service I reminded the mourners that geese travel by taking turns breaking the wind resistance for those behind. I said that Ben was breaking through for us and, like the geese who disappeared from sight, had not ceased to exist but was simply in that other place we called heaven. I went on to say that, in our grief, we were to take turns facing the resistance of grief for one another.

At the end of the service Ben’s parents, Dave and Kelly, came up to me nearly breathless, asking whether I knew that Ben loved geese and watched them by the hour and collected their images. I said that I did not know that. Coincidence? I think not.

The promise of heaven is the promise that we are eternal children of God. That is why Jesus says that there is a resurrection, because God is a God of the living and not of the dead. Reminding us of Moses’ encounter with the Living God in the burning bush (Exodus 3), Jesus says that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: the living, for all are alive to God.

Because eternal mysteries are often best conveyed in images, let me close with a story and a poem. Once upon a time, twins were conceived. Weeks passed, they developed, their awareness grew and they laughed for joy. *“Isn’t it great that we were conceived? Isn’t it great to be alive?”*

Time passed. They explored their world. When they found that their mother’s cord gave them life, they sang for joy: *“How great is our mother’s love that she shares her own life with us!”*

Weeks stretched into months and the twins noticed they were changing. *“What does it mean?”* asked the one. Replied the other, *“It means*

our stay in this world is coming to an end.” “But I don’t want to go,” said the first. “I want to stay here always.”

The second replied, “We have no choice. But maybe there is life after birth!” The first doubted: “But how can that be? We will shed our life cord and how is life possible without it? Besides, we have seen evidence that others were here before us, and none of them have returned to tell us that there is life after birth. No, this is the end.”

So that one fell into a great despair. “If conception ends in birth, what is the purpose of life in the womb? It’s meaningless! Maybe there is no mother after all.” The other protested “But there has to be! How else did we get here? How do we remain alive?”

The first challenged: “Have you ever seen our mother? Maybe she lives only in our minds. Maybe we made her up because the idea comforted us.”

And so these last days in the womb were filled with questioning and, for the one, fear. Yet the inevitable moment of birth arrived. When the twins passed from their world, they opened their eyes and they cried. For what they saw exceeded their fondest dreams.

And then this poem, “Gone From My Sight,” by Henry Van Dyke:

*I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side,
spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts
for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength.*

*I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck
of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.*

Then, someone at my side says, "There, she is gone." Gone where?

*Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast,
hull and spar as she was when she left my side.*

*And, she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined
port. Her diminished size is in me -- not in her.*

*And, just at the moment when someone says, "There, she is gone,"
there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices
ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"*

*Jesus’ life, death and resurrection has secured our lives and those of
our loved ones to God, now and for all eternity. Let us trust him. Amen.*