

## The Resurrection Question

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
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Luke 20:27-38

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has already made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and driven out the merchants from the temple. He has been spending every day teaching in the temple, and the religious authorities are not at all happy about it. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people want to kill him, but they can't find a way to do it, because all the people who hear Jesus teach are spellbound by what they hear.

So, they take a different tack. They try to discredit him. First, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders demand to know who gave Jesus the authority to do what he is doing. Jesus refuses to tell them and goes on to tell a parable against them. They would have liked to haul him away right then and there, but they were afraid of how the people might react.

So they keep watching Jesus and eventually send spies to try to trap him, so that they can hand him over to the governor. The spies ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. But Jesus' answer – "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" – is so amazing to them that they are stunned into silence.

The Sadducees's encounter with Jesus is a third attempt at discrediting him. The Sadducees were closely linked with the temple leadership, but unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in resurrection. For the Sadducees, the only Scriptures that had authority were the books of Moses, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Pentateuch or Torah. And those five books contained no explicit reference to resurrection. The disagreement between the Sadducees and the Pharisees over resurrection was so controversial that at one point violence actually erupted between the two groups. (You can read about the incident in chapter 23 of the Book of Acts.)

The Sadducees present Jesus with an absurd scenario meant to expose the implausibility of life after death. "Teacher," they begin, "Moses wrote that if a man's brother dies leaving a wife and no child, the brother should marry the woman now widowed, to raise up children with her." This was known as the law of levirate marriage, which derives from the Latin word *levir* meaning "brother-in-law." The law is found in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 25. Its purpose was to keep the deceased brother's name alive, ensure the perpetuation of property within the immediate family, and provide security for the brother's widow. At this point the Sadducees and Jesus are all on the same page.

But then the Sadducees offer up their farcical hypothetical. "Let's say that there were seven brothers. The first one married and died childless. The second brother then married the woman, then the third, and so on. All seven died without leaving her any children. Finally the woman herself died. At the resurrection, who will be her husband? Remember, seven married her."

The Sadducees must have thought to themselves, “now we’ve got him! That will stump Jesus for sure!” But, of course, it doesn’t!

Jesus dismisses the very basis of their question by explaining that life in the resurrection will not simply be a continuation of life as we know it. In this age people marry each other, but in the age to come marriage won’t be necessary. They will be children of the resurrection, who, like the angels, can no longer die. So, concerns about procreation, passing on property, and providing for widows will no longer be relevant. And from a feminist perspective, in the age to come the woman in the scenario will be her own person. She will not be the property of any man.

Jesus goes on to bolster the case for resurrection by citing a passage from the Torah, which the Sadducees took to be authoritative scripture. He refers them to the book of Exodus, chapter 3, where God speaks to Moses from a burning bush that is not consumed by the fire. Moses quotes God as saying: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And since “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” in some sense all of them are alive to God. Moses is speaking of the living, the resurrected.

In the wake of Jesus’ response, “they no longer dared to ask him another question.” Their strategy of trying to trip Jesus up by asking him a trick question failed once again. Not only did it fail, it completely backfired on them, leaving Jesus standing as the single most authoritative figure among them.

The question of what happens when we die is one that human beings have been asking for millennia. As Christians, we hope in the resurrection. We trust that one day what happened to Jesus nearly two millennia ago will happen to all of us as well. Beyond that we don’t have much to go on. The Bible says much more about living in the here and now than it does about life in the hereafter.

Consequently, many writers have speculated about what life in the hereafter might be like. For example, back in 1868, a religious novel entitled *The Gates Ajar*, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, portrayed heaven as being similar to earth, only better. Anything good or pleasing in this life would be found in the next life. Phelps’ portrayal of heaven resembled a retirement community minus the ill health and mortality. *The Gates Ajar* became the second best-selling religious novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A more recent example is the NBC television series “The Good Place,” created by Michael Schur. It is a unique comedy about what makes a good person. The show follows Eleanor Shellstrop (played by Kristen Bell), an ordinary woman who enters the afterlife, and thanks to some kind of error, is sent to the Good Place instead of the Bad Place (which is definitely where she belongs). While hiding in plain sight from Good Place Architect Michael (played by Ted Danson), she’s determined to shed her old way of living and *earn* her spot in the Good Place.

Such creative expressions may be consoling to some, entertaining to others. But what Jesus is saying is that the future God has in store for us cannot be understood as a simple extension of our present existence. We can’t simply take what we like from this current life, raise it to the Nth power, and call it heaven.

Resurrection involves transformation. Resurrection involves entering into an entirely new and different existence. It is an entirely new reality. Just as a baby waiting to be born cannot imagine the world outside the womb, we cannot possibly fathom the altogether new reality of resurrection. It affirms that death is not the end, that there is something more awaiting all of us. As Dumbledore puts it at the end of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, "death is but the next great adventure."

What happens after we die? For a Presbyterian perspective we find some help in our Book of Confessions. The Scots Confession declares: "The chosen departed are in peace, and rest from their labors; not that they sleep and are lost in oblivion as some fanatics hold, for they are delivered from all fear and torment, and all the temptations to which we and all God's chosen are subject in this life." And the Westminster Confession of Faith says that "the bodies of [human beings], after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God." In heaven these souls "behold the face of God" and wait for "the full redemption of their bodies."

But that is not the end of the story. The Scots Confession continues: "We believe that the same Lord Jesus shall visibly return for this Last Judgment as he was seen to ascend. And then, we firmly believe, the time of refreshing and restitution of all things shall come, so that those who from the beginning have suffered violence, injury, and wrong, for righteousness' sake, shall inherit that blessed immortality promised them from the beginning."

If there is a Presbyterian narrative about life after death, that's it. When we die, our souls go to be with God, where they enjoy God's glory and wait for the final judgment. At the final judgment bodies are reunited with souls, and eternal rewards and punishments are handed out.

So, as Christians, we need not be afraid of death. For we know that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. And in the resurrection, "when this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'"

The Christian tradition invites us to expand our worldview to include the reality of resurrection. It asserts that there is another layer or level of reality in addition to our material, visible reality of ordinary experience. There is another world – a world of spirit – that is just as real as the world we see around us. If we enlarge our worldview to include the existence of a world of spirit, it becomes easier to embrace the reality of resurrection and the hope of life everlasting. And with renewed hope in the resurrection, we receive renewed faith in the risen Christ, who gives us assurance that we are all alive in God's eyes and death won't change that. We are, all of us, children of God – children of the resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.