

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 20:27–38

<sup>27</sup> Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; <sup>30</sup> then the second <sup>31</sup> and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. <sup>32</sup> Finally the woman also died. <sup>33</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

## SERMON

In the fourteenth chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul writes ‘If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.’

What Paul is saying is that alive or dead, God will never let go of us. This hope is central to the Christian faith – in life and in death God keeps us in his care.

Not all Christians believe that though. Not everyone believes in life after death. There are plenty of people who think that this life is all there is, that we had best make hay while the sun is up. Do good works, love those around you, and live life to the fullest because what you see is what you get and there is nothing behind door number one. Jesus himself said that he came so that we would have life, and have it abundantly, and when he said this he wasn’t alluding to a future life; he was speaking in the present tense.

Often those who don’t subscribe to the idea of resurrection and heaven point out that this theology has been used in the past to turn a blind eye to suffering. An over emphasis on future grace and future glory can allow us to ignore our sisters and brothers in need. We can justify all manner of oppression and abuse because eventually God will sort it out. They will get their rewards in heaven, we need not help them now.

In a perverse understanding of posthumous justice we can even convince ourselves that it’s good for other people to suffer as it will merely serve to increase their heavenly rewards. God has decreed it and we’re just helping, we say as we participate in systems of oppression.

I suspect that few of us are actually that heartless, but it is true that belief in future divine justice does let us off the hook somewhat. Knowing that God will set things right at some undefined point in the future means that we don’t have to work too hard at setting things right here and now. We know that this is the case if we are able to walk by someone who is cold and hungry without stopping and offering assistance.

Overemphasizing life after death certainly has its drawbacks – if we over-spiritualize we lose touch with present reality. I think we’ve all heard the expression ‘he’s so heavenly minded that he’s no earthly good.’

In response, there are those who focus exclusively on the here and now. They believe that we need to get busy building God's kingdom here on earth in the present time. Now is the time to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before the Lord.

And so we work to eradicate poverty, mitigate lack of opportunity, provide education, housing, dignity – doing all those things that Jesus would have us do. There is no need for an afterlife, we will make below as above, earth as it is in heaven.

I don't think that either of these approaches reveal a healthy understanding of salvation. One assumes that the soul is saved in spite of or even at the expense of the body, the other emphasizes a present physical salvation with no regard for the spirit.

Does this have to be an either/or situation? Are our only choices life after death, or living out God's reign here on earth? We like to think in binaries – dualities – but we'll find that God's ways are above our ways. God is bigger than our categories.

Rather than choosing between life after death and life in the present, we can recognize that the two are intimately connected, that salvation is a much larger concept than we may think. God is concerned with our spirit, and God is also concerned with his good creation; God's goal is to reconcile *all* things to himself, not just some things.

If it makes us feel better, we are not the first generation to wrestle with these ideas. A disbelief in the afterlife is not exclusive to our modern generations – these ideas go way back.

There were religious leaders in Jesus' day who did not believe in life after death – they were called the Sadducees. The Sadducees were educated aristocratic priests who ran the temple; they were elites endowed with power and authority.

These priests did not believe in life after death because they couldn't find any explicit mention of it in the Torah, which are the first five books of the bible, the only writings recognized as sacred by the Sadducees.

According to their thinking eternal life was not scriptural, therefore it could not exist – and even if it did exist it didn't make much sense anyway – it's too complicated. To illustrate this complexity they put forward the scenario to Jesus that Deb read this morning.

Suppose a man took a wife and died before having a son. Mosaic law indicated that his brother should marry the widow and bear a son to keep his brother's name alive; to ensure that particular branch of the family tree continued.

The Sadducees developed this story further, repeating the scenario seven times so that the woman eventually was married to each of the seven brothers, and then asked 'In this afterlife that you speak of, who exactly is married to this woman?'

That's a good question.

Now, we can get all wrapped up in the idea of this poor woman being passed from man to man, with seemingly little choice about the matter, but that would be to miss the point. That was then, things are different now, and our indignation is not helpful.

We would be better served by simply updating the parable so that we can maintain our focus on the original question. If a woman marries a man who later dies, and later in life she chooses to remarry, who then is she married to in heaven?

Suddenly this hits a lot closer to home, because this situation is much more applicable. There are many among us who are on second or third marriages. Now, some of the first marriages ended in divorce rather than death, and that changes things. I suspect that some of you may be thinking right now 'If I'm back with my ex after death maybe that means I didn't make it to the good place – maybe I went down instead of up.'

But, divorce aside, there are a number of us who have had happy loving relationships that were cut short, and who were fortunate enough to find love a second or even third time. The Sadducees question still stands 'Who will you be married to in heaven?'

Jesus' answer is astounding – to me his answer is a testament to the veracity of scripture because you can't make this stuff up. Jesus' wisdom completely sidesteps our limited understanding and categorizations.

First of all, Jesus spoke the Sadducees language. He was aware that they only recognized the authority of the Pentateuch; those first five books of the bible that were attributed to Moses. So Jesus responded to the Sadducees challenge using Moses' own words as recorded in their holy books.

The section that Jesus quoted is from Moses' encounter with God in the desert wastelands in the form of a burning bush. God had just instructed Moses to stroll into Pharaoh's palace and demand that all the Israelite slaves be set free. Then Moses was to go to the Israelite people and command them to rise up and follow him out of Egypt.

'What if they don't listen to me?' Moses asked. 'Under whose authority am I speaking, who do I tell them you are?'

God's response was 'I AM.' There's a lot packed into that small expression – essentially God identified himself as pure ontological presence – that's deep. Moses must have blanched a little at that and wondered how he would attempt to express this concept to illiterate slaves, so God softened a little and elaborated. 'Tell them that I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'

Jesus explained to the Sadducees that God is a God of the living, not of the dead; that God spoke of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob not in the past tense, but in the present. His conclusion was that all three of these fathers of the faith were alive as far as God is concerned, and if the Creator says they are alive then they are alive indeed.

This seems to be a clear answer to the Sadducees about the existence of life after death, but what of the marriage question? Jesus said that in the resurrection realm people don't get married – but do we bring our marriages with us to heaven? This seems a little more ambiguous.

I find that God's wisdom is revealed in the way in which Jesus describes resurrection and God himself, and that is in terms of relationship. Jesus did not attempt to describe heaven as a defined place or time. He did not describe what it is like, other than to say that death has no part in it.

Instead Jesus described the resurrection as a state of being in relation to God. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are in a presently existing relationship with God. As Karl Barth notes, 'Since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to

God, as are we, then they are not dead to us. We do not live without them; as they have spoken in former times they still speak today.'

This has special meaning to us today as we remember our war dead. We do not live without them; as they have spoken in former times they still speak today. There is still an existing relationship.

To go back to resurrection as relationship, Jesus specified that the resurrection is based on our relationship with God, not each other. We run into trouble when we try to use the language and categories of this world when we talk about heaven.

Jesus pointed out that eternal life is not simply a continuation of this mortal life on the other side of death. Presently we perceive dimly – things are going to be a lot different when we experience God directly.

This assurance of resurrection as relationship with God is actually the most hopeful news that we could receive, as it contains the best parts of the dualistic Kingdom-of-heaven-after-death and Kingdom-of-heaven-here-on-earth viewpoints that I mentioned earlier.

Because we are assured of a continuing relationship with God after death we can endure the sufferings of this earthly life, knowing that something greater is in store. This is the gift of hope, and not something that should be diminished.

However, knowing that the future life is not a straightforward continuation of this life means that we won't be able to simply pick up where we left off here. We won't necessarily have the opportunity to take care of the business that we failed to complete this side of death. That means that we need to actively work in the here and now as well. We cannot leave kind deeds undone, loving words unsaid. We cannot bear grudges or wait until tomorrow to fix broken relationships. We need to work for justice and act with mercy every day, as long as it is called today.

In this way we don't subscribe to salvation of the soul at the cost of the body, nor a present physical utopia with no consideration of the spirit.

Instead, since heaven is all about relationship, we set as our priority the healing of our present relationships. First with God, the God of the living, and then through God our spouses, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

If the heaven is defined by relationship with God and our relationship with God exists both in life and in death, then the veil between heaven and earth is much thinner than we generally think. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven takes on a deeper meaning.

Death is the end of many things, but it is not the end of everything. Because our relationship with God exists in life and in death, that means that we have the confidence to begin living out the reign of God in the present, with the full assurance that what God loves in life he will continue to love in death.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.