

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday November 10, 2019 Proper 27C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 20: 27-38
Theme: Practicing Resurrection

If you are like me, one of the things that troubles you about religious types is the tendency to act as if they have everything figured out. To focus so much on having all the answers that they neglect to engage the more difficult questions that a life of faith actually includes. Here at St. Mark's, I hope that one of our community's core values is honoring people's spiritual questions. This is not just a place of answers. You are welcome with your questions, your doubts and your confusion. They are the things that keep us moving and growing and open to what God desires to do in our lives. We know that many of our questions and concerns will not be answered easily or quickly. But as a people of faith we believe that the life and teaching of Jesus is more than big enough to handle our doubts and engage our questions. Faith is not about having all the answers. Faith is about being in relationship with the living God through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is about struggling with the mystery of life and love and belief and being willing to say, "sometimes I believe, help me when I don't," "I want to believe, Lord, help my unbelief."

Jesus was no stranger to difficult questions and in today's Gospel reading he is confronted by his critics. The Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection, come to Jesus with a hilarious quandary concerning resurrection. It's a "what if" kind of question in which they posit a crazy succession of husbands for a woman who is made a widow over and over again by all seven brothers who in turn marry her. "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection, they ask?"

Of course, it is a trap. They want to put this radical teacher in his place by pitting him against his own tradition. This is a kind of Bible throw-down with the Sadducees and Jesus. Both Jesus and his skeptical opponents revere the tradition, honoring the writings of Moses as sacred text. They start from the same place, but differ a great deal in how they interpret the traditions precepts.

The Sadducees were one of several parties within Judaism. They were of the priestly class, many of whom were aristocratic and wealthy. They were theologically conservative and limited their acceptance of scripture to the first five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For them, no teaching could be authoritative if not contained in this narrow canon of scripture.

Seven weddings and Seven Funerals: "Whose wife will she be?"

Jesus basically says, you are confusing this age, the here and now with that age beyond death. The rules are not the same for this age and the age to come. You don't

need to place your own cultural norms and practices onto the afterlife. Don't force your temporal life and its expectations from Moses' teaching on marriage into a place of permanence. God is God not of the dead but of the living.

Moses' teaching belongs in this age, but Jesus is pointing to a union far greater in the age to come. The dead are raised. Life continues in the presence of God. Is one to think of marriage and progeny as one's only life mission? Resurrection says that life is larger than we know. Why not join with God, the one who makes all the living? There is more life than you know, don't get caught up in your death dealing ways.

As one commentator said it, partnership matters. It is a difference between death and life. Partnerships, marriages, friendships and community (joining one another) in this age all serve to support us through the chapters of life and prepare us for death. But once someone dies, if they are joined to God, they know not death. They know life, for all joined to God live. As Jesus said, "Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."

What does resurrection do? Resurrection reminds the world of the partnership God made with humanity; a partnership aimed toward life. Resurrection causes us to think of life in a larger way, to think not only of the here and now but of life beyond this life.

I'm not trying to disparage this life or insult it. In fact, this life is beautiful and worthy and valuable, so much so that the God who created this age also chose to live in it as a teacher, prophet, healer and chosen one. It is this age, the here and now that gives us the inklings of resurrection. It is our struggle with time that point toward something beyond it, it is the mystery of life that urges us to consider a life outside of this life.

Jesus mentions Moses and the burning bush as a clue to the larger understanding of life and resurrection. That story is a lesson in time. Moses, Jesus says, understands that life can be found again on the other side of death. A bush tells him things that are amazing and numinous – things that should consume life are in fact under the will and control of God. God speaks to Moses as the bush burns, two impossible things that nevertheless become possible. God speaks to humans. Fire can burn but not consume. Moses learns that resurrection can look like not being consumed by that which should consume you. Resurrection can look like the opposite of what it should be.

What does resurrection look like? God being with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob demonstrates resurrection's wildness. It is going to a foreign land at the direction of God and having a child at an impossible age. It is in journeying to one's death with the hope that life might be on the other side. It is in wrestling with God-and living.

Resurrection means living on even though circumstances should not allow it to be so. It is the miracle of persisting, of stubbornly illuminating the glory of God. It is the

miracle of a church left for dead ten years ago but now a thriving worshipping community

Jesus doesn't see resurrection as a game or a controversy. Jesus understands resurrection to be part of the very life of God. Jesus knows a God who is in the resurrection business from beginning to end. "God is a God of the living not of the dead."

Jesus' critics work out of an old worldview, a world where women are property to be passed from one man to another. The poor woman in their story, these interrogators could be talking about livestock the way they speak of her. In the resurrection, to whom does she belong?

But Jesus cuts through this disturbing framework and says essentially, "Your question betrays your narrow point of view. The resurrection is not just some extension of your world. No, far from it, resurrection is a whole new world, the world as God intended the world to be. This woman is a child of God, not a piece of property. The answer to their question is thus unexpected. Resurrection is a way of saying that God is not bound by our categories or our limitations. Resurrection is God's wildness taking shape in a whole new future.

Jesus' response to the Sadducees' odd question opens up possibilities for us. The Resurrection is not merely more of our time, an extension of our world. The resurrection brings God's saving, creative work to fulfillment not only in the future but here and now. The church once spoke of Sunday, the day of resurrection as the "eighth day." The world in our defining story was created in six days, on the seventh day God rested from his labors. The "eighth day" is that day when creation is brought to completion, perfected as God intended – a day of resurrection.

The real question is can we allow Jesus to disrupt our world? Can we place our hope in a new world through the light and life of Jesus' resurrection? Without Jesus' resurrection, without his being raised from the grave, talk of our own resurrection, is just that, talk.

We all long for resurrection. We all know that we need to embrace a further journey. We want the power of God at work in us for new life. The problem of course is that resurrection requires death. The way up is actually the way down. If you want to be resurrected you have to endure death. Many of us, though we long for the new life of God, are resistant to the path that must be followed to discover resurrection. To be perfectly honest we've put so much energy and striving into climbing up ourselves that the ideas of surrendering, going down to loss and death is difficult to swallow. In fact, most of us avoid death like hell. And this is one of the primary reasons that so many people never discover the fullness of resurrection in their lives here and now.

Jesus was fond of saying that “if you want to save your life you must lose it.” Therein is the path to resurrection. And life is busy giving us all kinds of opportunities to embrace God’s resurrection wildness. Often it is the loss of a job, or a fortune, or our reputation that offers the crisis we need to find God at work from the bottom up. Perhaps a house has been flooded or burned to the ground. Sometimes it’s admitting that we were wrong and making the first move to reconcile. Finally admitting that our life is marked by a pattern of addiction or facing health problems are moments when resurrection comes close. Sometimes it is serving in the way that opens up right in front of you even though you are not sure you can or want to do it, caring for an aging parent, caretaking for a spouse or friend. Resurrection requires that we suffer death and that we are courageous enough and crazy enough to look for God within that death. For that is where the resurrected one is to be found, these are his stomping grounds, his native soil.

The resurrection is not a one-time miracle that proved Jesus was God. Jesus’ death and resurrection name and reveal what is happening everywhere and all the time in God and in everything God creates. Reality is always moving toward resurrection. (Rohr)

There is a line in the **Apostles Creed** that I find comforting. Because of this line to think it would be helpful if we said the Apostles that Creed more often.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again. (Apostle’s Creed)

“**He descended to the dead.**” I suppose it is a strange line to take comfort in but I find comfort in knowing that we worship and serve a God who knows the sting of death, who has befriended death and brings life out of death, resurrection out of disaster all the time. For resurrection is Christ’s stock and trade now and we who have joined ourselves to Christ through the waters of baptism and the nourishment of the Eucharist are invited into the practice of resurrection.

I once heard Bishop Mathes of San Diego say, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” And I took that to mean that in the midst of every crisis we face, in the mist of every death we encounter the Risen One is waiting for us, stalking the edges of death and discouragement with compassion in his eyes, the laughter of God on his lips and resurrection in his wounded hands.

Let’s face it the Sadducees are stuck. They don’t believe in the resurrection. They think that what you see is what you get. They believe that only good breeding and ample bank accounts will see you through. But Jesus sees something else, he’s sees the power of God at work in the world. He knows that resurrection is woven into the

very fabric of the universe by the maker of heaven and earth and he will live that truth out in his own body.

His answer to their question is an invitation to practice resurrection. He invites them out of the kingdom of death and into the kingdom of God. But the spiritual path is difficult for it requires that we discover that the way down is the way up. The good news is that there is help along the path, from each other to be sure and from the Risen One who descended to the dead.

As the writer of Luke proclaims early in his story of Jesus, "For nothing will be impossible for God. **Luke 1.37**

Resurrection is about how everyone is claimed by God, wrestled from the surety of death. For to God, all are alive.

Practice Resurrection.