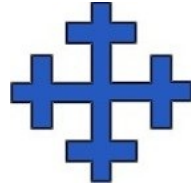


St Mary of the Harbor

Provincetown, Massachusetts



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Pentecost 22 C Proper 27

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 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. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."



A New Beginning

Is this all there is? Or is there more to life? People have been asking those kinds of questions for a long, long time. Depending on who you talk to, the answer will vary based on what someone believes or does not believe.

It comes as no surprise that people of faith and people of no particular faith, have different ideas about what follows after death. That is as true today as it was the day a group of Sadducees approached Jesus with a rather duplicitous question. It was question couched in the context of Levirate marriage, a custom documented in the Book of Deuteronomy and dating back to the time before the Israelites entered the Promised Land.

According to Torah, it was the oldest surviving brother's duty to marry the widow of his deceased brother. Sounds kind of icky doesn't it? While it sounds that way to some folks today, Levirate marriage was an accepted practice among a people who had first hand experience with high mortality rates within their community. If you put yourself in their shoes, you can better understand the reasoning for it. Not only did it provide a means to insure the continuity of the family lineage, it provided a way to care for and provide material support to childless widows who otherwise would have faced a precarious future.

To be honest, I find the Levirate marriage example the Sadducees used rather amusing. Given the fate of each of his predecessors, one could see how the next brother in line for marriage would have been tempted to turn to his younger brothers and say, “You can go ahead of me.” And then there is that poor woman. No doubt, she would have been very pleased with Jesus’ views on the topic of resurrection. Who wouldn’t? After being married to seven men from the same family, imagine her relief in learning that she wouldn’t have to spend eternity married to any of them.

So then, what does all of this have to do with resurrection? Given what Jesus had to say, apparently not much. Perhaps that is why he appropriated the topic and refocused the discussion. While the Sadducees had approached Jesus as a prosecutor might; by asking a leading question in order to elicit a desired answer in order to discredit him, Jesus did not take the bait. Nor did he chastise his Jewish brethren. Instead, he addressed his interrogators in a respectful manner and offered a well thought out response to their question.

Of course, it would have been nice if Jesus had been a bit more forthcoming about resurrections. I don’t know about you but I would have liked to have heard more about *what* resurrection *is* rather than what it *is not*. But then, that would miss the point Jesus was trying to make.

Instead of delving into the minutia of ancient marriage customs or debating who ends up with whom in the end, Jesus redirects everyone’s attention away from death and toward life. And he does it by pointing to God, the source from whom all life flows. So the question is, if God is the God of the living as Jesus says, what does that say to those of us, are queued up and waiting to see the Holy One?

Maybe it is because we humans experience life on finite terms that we are prone to compartmentalize what we cannot fully comprehend. The Sadducees in Jesus’ day did not buy into the concept of resurrection. I dare say the same holds true for a number of today’s churchgoers as well. After all, it is challenging to believe in something you cannot wrap your mind around.

The problem, I think, is that we understand death far better than we understand life. We live in a world that is shrouded in the ways of death, ways that separate us from one another and from the God who calls us to life. And on a personal level, who among us is not familiar with death? Who hasn’t attended too many funerals? Who hasn’t said goodbyes to loved ones at the graveyard? Who hasn’t had their hearts broken?

Death isn’t just what happens to the deceased. It is also what happens when the living lose hope. Death is like the thief Jesus spoke about, who comes only to steal and kill and destroy. But then Jesus goes on to say, “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹

¹ John 10:10 paraphrased

Jesus' words are a reminder that even though death is a part of life, it is not what defines our lives. For the children of God, for children of the resurrection, life is defined by love. And when your life is defined by love, resurrection ceases to be a theological concept and becomes a lived reality.

We all know death far better than we should. Rather than dwelling on endings, Jesus invites us to embrace a new beginning, a new way of seeing and being in the world. The fact is, you don't have to die to understand resurrection. Rather, find someone who has lost hope and love them. Indeed, as Jesus himself knew, love is the only thing that can bring life from death. Sounds a lot like resurrection, does it not?