

*He is Alive!*

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 10, 2013

**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."

(Context: Today is the day before Veteran's Day, 2013. We are honoring our men and women of service and we are remembering the valiant acts of sacrifice they made in the continuing fight for freedom we affirm as a part of our national heritage. Freedom is given by God as an inalienable right, however, every generation must once again affirm and claim that right for themselves. Freedom is not free. It comes like a profession of faith, with a price to be paid!)

In our weekly Bible Study, we start our conversation about a new book by identifying the author, the location, and the date of the original writing. We do that for three reasons. First, it is important to know the background of the work we are studying. It is easy to forget sometimes that these books of the Bible are written around a social setting, that there are other events that affect the perspective of both the writer and the reader. Second, we need to remind ourselves of the closeness of the books we study to the characters who are key to our understanding. When we study the book of Romans for example, (a shameless plug to encourage anyone who might like to come to our current Bible Study on Wednesday nights at 7) we talk about Paul the author who encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and had a conversion experience. We talk about the book being written about 25 years after the crucifixion. We remind ourselves that some who hear the letter would have actually known Jesus and can share personal experience with others about their relationship with him. Finally, we want to seek a relevance for the scripture in our own time. What can this "Word of God" written some two thousand years ago possibly have to do with me?

Today as we hear the word written by the evangelist Luke, we should ask ourselves the questions and do the mental work needed particularly to answer the third question, but also to check in on the first two. Luke writes his gospel at about 75 A.D. He writes about 40 years after the events he is describing take place. In Biblical terms, he writes about one generation removed from the events themselves! He writes to a group of people who have witnessed the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and also the persecution of religious leaders and faithful practitioners of the Jewish faith by the Romans! This people is a hopeless, helpless people who wonder how God can bring justice to a world so completely controlled by an empire of injustice!

As they hear the story of the Sadducees it comes on the heels of their hero, Jesus, liberating the temple from the sacrilege of sacrifice salesmen! Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem to a hero's welcome! The people have laid palm branches and shouted loud hosannas! He has gone to the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers and he has rebuked the temple leaders. They are looking for a way to kill him; to eliminate him, to rid themselves of this terrible enemy! This background brings us precisely to the point where our gospel message intersects our celebration of Veteran's Day this year!

My father is a World War II veteran. He enlisted at age 17 and was one of 8 brothers who served in this war. Somewhere there is a picture of all 8 after they returned from the war. Thankfully, they all returned; a somewhat remarkable accomplishment. Dad never talked much about his time in the service. My encounter with other veterans, whether of this war or other conflicts our nation has been involved in, has been similar. Veterans are sometimes willing to talk about the duties or responsibilities they had but they rarely talk about what we might call the "Action they have seen."

There was one evening however about a dozen years ago when I was preparing a sermon and sat down to talk with my dad. He told me that during his time in WWII he served on a ship in the south pacific. He had enlisted late in the war and in 1946 he was shipboard when the nuclear bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. His ship was not near enough to Japan to see the bomb blast but the results of that attack changed the nature of the ship's operation for good.

The ship dad served on was largely a supply ship. They loaded and offloaded supplies to support the war effort. When the bombs were dropped it was anticipated that Japan would soon negotiate terms for surrender. Almost overnight, dad said, his ship went from a ship of war to a ship retrofitted to carry supplies for peace. Cargo began to arrive and be loaded onto their ship for survivors of the bomb blast. The ship set sail for a Japanese harbor where it finally made port.

The ship docked on the other side of the island of Japan from where the bombings had taken place. In addition to the ship's responsibility for bringing supplies, those on board were tasked with offloading supplies onto cargo cars and riding with the train to the places designated as relief sights for bombing victims. Dad said the side of Japan they landed on looked like nothing had happened to it. There was

green grass and ample vegetation. Buildings were standing and people were moving about in the everyday pattern of their everyday lives. As the train traveled through the ridge of mountains to the other side of the island, however, evidence of a traumatic event soon became all too clear. Toward the top of the mountain range signs of fire started to scar the land. As the train reached the top and they had a clear view, devastation spread before them for as far as they could see.

Dad described the land as charred and destroyed. There was little left standing and that which was standing seemed oddly out of place. There was almost no sign of human activity. People were in a state of shock even months after the occurrence of the attacks! When the train arrived at the station, he said people seemed to come from nowhere. Apparently there had been word spread that some sort of aid was to arrive and when the train pulled into the station they showed up. Those who were there had a look of desperation in their eyes; a sense of hopelessness, a wondering at how they would ever be able to survive such a horrible devastation and disruption to their lives.

The people of Luke's day were wondering much the same thing as they received Luke's gospel. They had been ravaged by the Romans and their very way of worship, their connection with their creator had been violently and completely removed from them. Not only that but their leadership had been decimated and their lives seemed hopeless! Luke writes in chapter 1 that he wants to give an complete and accurate account so that Theopholis might not be misinformed! Here he paints a picture of hopelessness intended to give hope! Here Luke invites us beyond what we can see in this world and into where we can find the promise of the next!

In verse 27 Luke introduces us to the Sadducees. This is to be the only reference to them in all of the gospel. Luke does mention them in Acts 5 but here his purpose is to remind us of the pressure Jesus is under. Jesus has overturned the temple. He has belittled the Pharisees and now another group of religious elite come to take him on. They do so in the hope of discrediting him so that the crowds will cease to listen to him. They ask him a question!

The Sadducees do not believe there is a resurrection after death. Before we go on, I am going to ask you to suspend what you know for a few minutes. Imagine if you can that this world is all there is! The justice of this world is all there is! The relationship in this world is all there is! The struggle in this world is all there is! There is no possibility of anything beyond what you can experience in this life. There is no imagination, there is no curiosity. There is only this! That is what the Sadducees believed!

They regarded only the first 5 books of the Scripture as the revealed word of God. They believed Moses had given them this word as the sole guide to life and they were zealous in their effort to live this life by the law and only by the law! The first 5 books, called Torah (the law) were written by Moses and they contained the entire word of God as it was intended to be received. The 613 laws written there were

the complete guidance they followed and were quite sufficient for the living of their lives. They needed nothing more!

In their close-minded effort to discredit Jesus, they came to ask a question. The question was regarding what is called levirate marriage. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses writes that if a man marries and dies childless, that man's brother is to take his wife and raise up children so his name will be carried on. They accept Moses as their authority and do not see any connection between any of Moses' writings and the teachings of Jesus.

They propose an absurd situation where a married man dies childless and all 6 of his brothers take his wife, die and leave no children. Then the woman dies and they want to know whose wife she will be in the resurrection. Their example poses three questions and Jesus answers all three.

The first question they raise is that of resurrection. Is there resurrection from the dead. Jesus addresses this question a little later and I will also. The second question is what will life be like in the resurrection? The simpleton Sadducees, those who can see no possibility beyond what is in front of them can only pose their question as if resurrection life will be exactly the same as life in this world. Jesus very quickly sets them straight!

People in this world, he says, "marry and give one another in marriage. People who are fortunate enough to be considered worthy of the age of resurrection will neither marry or give in marriage." In other words, Jesus tells them and us, do not assume that what you experience in this world will be the same as what you will experience in the next. In this world you experience only in part. In 1 Cor. 13 Paul writes, " Now I see only in part but then I will see fully, even as I have been fully seen." In this world we experience only part of our relationship. We experience husbands and wives. We experience children and the joy of their accomplishments. We experience grandchildren and the promise of future generations.

However, we also experience war and conflict. We see the devastation of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the future of our generations is called into question. We see homelessness and helplessness and disease that could be prevented. We see decay and disarray and we wonder if there is or can be any hope at all. We see churches that sling mud at others, valuing them as less than worthy. We see politicians furthering their own agenda and lining their own pockets. We see genocides and we perpetuate the understanding that we are all entitled to our inalienable rights as long as the all we speak of are the ones who look and speak and think like we do! The people of Luke's time experienced exactly the same things. Their way of life had been destroyed and their places of worship had been ransacked. They had no confidence in their leaders and the prospects of justice for them seemed slim. Luke's reference to the Sadducees and their narrow-minded approach to the world exemplified this concern. Life in this world is experienced only in part. There is more!

In the next world, those who are worthy to be considered for the resurrection and participation in the Kingdom will experience in full. In the next world there will be no need for sun or moon or stars because God will dwell with God's people (Rev. 21). There will be no more tears or pain. There will be only a fullness of life that comes from the full participation of each person in the promise of perfection God alone can provide! Justice in that time and place will be complete and will not rely on human standards of interpretation but will be administered by God alone!

We may wonder as we contrast Jesus vision with the limited vision of the Sadducees if we will know our loved ones in that age of resurrection. Jesus tells us life will be different and he doesn't specifically answer the question but I believe he alludes to the answer as he reminds us that in that age, God knows Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Because God knows them we can infer that there will be a way of recognizing them. If we can recognize them, I believe we will be able to recognize our loved ones also. They may not look the same but they will be recognizable. We can have confidence that in that age the fullness of our relationships will be complete because it will all be in the fullness of the presence of God, a God who knew us before we were born and who has a plan for us, a plan to prosper us and not to bring us to harm!

That brings us to the third question the Sadducees raise this morning. Is there a difference between immortality and eternal life in resurrection. Immortality implies that something always is and always was and always will be. Certainly we find comfort in the words of Jeremiah I quoted above. God knew us before we were born. He does have a plan for us. For a brief second we might want to imagine that plan does not, could not include death...at least not death in the fullest extent imaginable. The Sadducees however, remind us otherwise. In their example this morning the Greek word phrase they use to describe the deaths of the brothers and the woman is to "become quite dead!" The phrase is understood humorously in the movie *The Princess Bride* where a character describes someone as being completely dead which, he notes, is different from being slightly dead. Slightly dead, he goes on to say is at least somewhat alive!

The death the Sadducees are talking about is being quite dead! The death is full and complete. The death is a death of body, soul, and spirit! There can be nothing left alive of it. For those of us on this side of the resurrection life, it is quite possibly the most frightening state of being we can imagine! Yet imagine it we must! This is the death Jesus experienced. It is a death so complete and so total that Jurgen Moltman, a prolific theologian, in one of his works describes it as a time God had to turn away from and could not look!

You might wonder this morning why this death must be so total. What did Jesus have to experience it so completely? Why must we? The answer I share is so essential to our faith that I pray in this moment you will be able to hear it! **UNLESS WE DIE COMPLETELY WE CANNOT EXPERIENCE THE FULL POWER OF GOD!** There you have it. If a part of us is still alive, God's action in resurrection is not a full action.

As the character in *Princess Bride* said, to be not quite dead is to be still alive. If we are still alive; if our spirit or our soul or any part of our being remains then we are merely resuscitated! We were never dead and we had no reason to trust God!

What God wants us to know this morning is that we can, we must trust Him completely! This is our faith. It is the faith Jesus found in the garden when He prayed, "Let this cup pass me by, never the less, not my will but thine!" This faith, this total and complete trust in God reminds us that if God can raise Jesus from the dead He can and will also raise us. If he will raise us from the dead there is nothing He cannot do! If there is nothing He cannot do, we can trust Him to do everything in our lives; we can surrender our lives to him and we can live in this age fully and completely for him knowing that justice will come, knowing that whether it comes in this age or the next it will be the righteous and perfect justice of a God completely worthy of our trust.

Immortality is an incomplete position to have for a person of faith. Immortality reduces the power of God. The promise of resurrection and eternal life allows for God to demonstrate God's great love for us! That knowledge allows us to consider completely the first question the Sadducees wanted to ask. "Is there a resurrection of the dead?" Jesus answers using the only authority they will accept. Jesus uses the words of Moses. He uses the very scripture the Sadducees themselves use to govern their lives. To deny the authority would be to deny the very lives they have lived.

Jesus says, "Moses himself affirms the resurrection of the dead." In Exodus 3 Moses is being sent back to Egypt. He asks, "Who shall I say sent me" and God answers, "Tell them, 'I AM' sent you." God does not say I was or I will be. He says, I Am! The God who is alive sends Moses to speak to God's people, to teach them, to remind them He is alive and is present with them, not in some mystical sense but in a very real sense. Just as he is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, those who have died to us but are quite obviously alive to God because He is their God! The word does not say he was their God but they are alive to God and God is alive to them! There is a resurrection of the dead and those who have entered that resurrection now testify to us that it is real! **THEY ARE ALIVE!**

Having answered the questions of the Sadducees, Jesus now seeks to heal and give hope to all of Luke's congregation and to all of us. As Luke tells the story there is a woman. She almost goes unnoticed. She is treated as property. She is the wife of the first man. Most likely she became wife by way of a contract between the man and her father. She never had hope in this world of aspiring to any of her dreams or ambitions. She was always to be property; first of the father and then of the husband.

When the husband died there might have been a flicker of hope except for the law of levirate marriage. The woman, living in this age was given as property is given first to the next brother and the next and to the next and to all six! She was never asked. She never consented. She had no rights, no freedoms, only the hopeless, helpless, hapless continuation of that which always existed in this age!

This woman represents the injustice of the age we live in. She not only represents the centuries of oppression of women, she also represents the centuries of oppression of people of color, of people of different sexual persuasion, of people who speak different languages. She represents all people who have no hope. She represents you and me in every situation where justice is meted out unfairly. She represents people who are abused by parents who should love and care for them. She represents people who are taken advantage of by pastors and teachers and other people in power. She represents each of us in our daily lives where we have no opportunity to rectify our own helplessness!

We may say, "the woman was at least resurrected," but was she? No, she really was not. She was an example. She was invisible. She was only a token. She was the one who was bullied by all the Reggie Incognito's of the world. She was the one who was tormented in the halls by the people of privilege and power in our schools. She was the one who was terrorized by people who thought her fear was funny! She was never made known. She had no hope.

When my dad offloaded supplies for the people of Japan he saw at first the look of hopelessness in their eyes. He saw the great injustice that had been perpetrated upon the innocent and he recognized that they no longer could see anything beyond the destitution of their own sad and pathetic existence. Then as the food was distributed he saw in their eyes a flicker of recognition. He saw a moment of hope as they experienced something beyond anything they could have ever imagined! He saw in their eyes a recognition of new life after a sure and certain death.

God invites us to see that life today! He invites us to trust Him even unto death so that He alone might bring us from the total futility of our lives into the promise and possibility of new life in Him. Our God is not the God of the dead, but He is the God of the living and by His grace and by His love we are alive in Him. We experience eternal life in resurrection because Jesus overcame the same fear we are called to and was willing to completely trust God for his life. God invites us to trust Him completely today. **HE IS ALIVE!** Amen!