

Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these.²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

²⁴ "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.²⁵ I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice²⁹ and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.³⁰ By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. (John 5:19-30)

The Greatest Miracle: Giving Life to the Dead

Last week, my wife told me about an interesting website. I had to check it out for myself. It's called "Bonzai Kittens." It explains the ancient Chinese art of molding a kitten's body to fit the shape of a jar. According to the website, you put the kitten into a jar when it's newborn and as it grows, its body will assume the shape of the jar. When it's grown, it will stay in that shape. What do you think of that? Doesn't it sound horrible? People all over the country were up in arms over this website. But you know what? It was a hoax. There's no such thing as bonsai kittens and there never has been. But a fair number of people thought it was real.

The internet is full of ridiculous things but if you turn on your common sense, you realize those things aren't true. To some people, the topic we have before us this morning seems ridiculous. It seems like only the most simple and unthinking people would buy into it. What are we talking about? Judgment Day. Jesus returning and raising the dead seems unbelievable to many people. Now, most Americans believe in a life after death. But they're like a young woman I once had in a class. When I explained the Bible's teaching about Judgment Day, she asked, "You mean our bodies are going to come back to life?" She had never even considered the possibility of such a thing happening. But that's exactly what Jesus says to us today. And it's not a hoax. Jesus presents to us **the greatest miracle: giving life to the dead.**

I.

Jesus points to that greatest miracle this morning to illustrate his relationship with the Father. What Jesus says here is quite difficult. To understand it, you have to remember that he and his Father are one. There is only one God. And the Father and the Son are united in their wills and in their plans. So the Son of God can do only what he sees the Father doing because they are perfectly united in what they want and in what they do. Just to show us how they are one and equal in every way, Jesus says, **"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it."**

The power to give life is amazing all by itself. The greatest difficulty in the theory of evolution is: how did life start? You can put all the chemicals that make up a living cell in a test tube, you can even run electricity through it, but it does not come to life. Only God has the power to give life. But as amazing as the creation of life is, bringing the dead back to life is an even greater miracle. Think about the natural order of things. A husband and wife give life to a child through pregnancy. But if that child dies, those parents cannot bring it back. If you look beyond the biology, the mystery deepens. What determines if our bodies are alive? Is it breathing? Is it being connected to our brains? Is it having enough of our higher brain functions that we have personality? Our society struggles with those questions. But the Bible tells us that life is when the soul and body are together. The soul gives life to the body. But once the soul is ripped away from the body, there's no way for us to glue it back.

But God can. Jesus is the Son of God, so he has the power to give back life. That's so important, because death is the fate of all people here. When God created Adam and Eve, he put the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden so that they could eat its fruit and never die. His power was going to keep them alive and healthy forever. But when they sinned, they introduced death into this world. You and I die because we are sinners. Every birthday that we pass reminds us that this life must end.

But in the Bible, death means more than just the time when our soul leaves our body. The Bible often calls hell death, because the basic idea in death is separation. Just as in physical death, our souls are separated from our bodies, in hell sinners are separated from God forever. Think of a person who lives on the street. They're cold and hungry. They're alone and miserable. And they wander past an expensive restaurant. Through the glass they see families who are warm and happy together and enjoying wonderful meals. And that person on the street cannot come in. That's hell. That's eternal death.

There's one more kind of death and it's the kind of death that Jesus speaks of first this morning. Every human being is born dead in sin. What does it mean? It means that we're born without faith in God. We're born separated from God, born as his enemies because we're born sinful. We don't like to think of ourselves that way. We like to believe that we're basically good people. But no matter how much evidence we think we have to prove that point, God's verdict is simple: every word, every deed, every thought and feeling that come from us is totally and completely corrupted. It's all sin – even when we think we're doing our best. If even our best thoughts and feelings and words and deeds are totally corrupted, how can we ever get back to God?

We can't. That's exactly Jesus' point. We can't get back to God. So God's judgment has to be that we go to hell when we die. But Jesus says, **"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."**

Jesus turns judgment upside down. We don't like being judged. We don't want other people judging the choices we make in our lives. And if someone says that we're falling under God's judgment, that usually means he's going to send us to hell. But for us, being judged by Jesus does not mean being condemned to hell because we have crossed over from death to life. Jesus said that the dead hear his voice and they live. Every one of us was born dead in sin. But we dead people heard something. That's a miracle. No dead person can hear anything. But the voice of the Son of God is greater than death. It reaches across the sin in our hearts that separates us from God and it brings us home to him. It gives us life – which means it gives us faith.

When we come to believe, we cross over from death to life. How do we believe? Not by our own thinking or choosing. God didn't leave it up to us to somehow decide to believe. If he had done that, heaven would be empty. The voice of the Son of God comes to us in the gospel and Jesus gives us life. Jesus calls us to faith when he tells us that he knows perfectly well how sinful we are and he loves us anyway. Jesus calls us to trust in him when he announces that he gets us out of hell. He died and he suffered hell itself before he died. He paid for all the sin that separates us from God. He took our place outside that restaurant window staring in, longing for warmth and love and care. He suffered it all. And then he rose and gave us eternal life. When we hear that message, God does a miracle. He takes dead sinners and he makes us live. **The greatest miracle is giving life to the dead. Jesus gives us life now.**

II.

But of course, that life is chained to the life to come. Faith is trusting that God will keep his promise and raise us on Judgment Day. That gets us back to Jesus' statement that the Father has entrusted all judgment to him. Jesus says, **"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."**

Jesus returns to that picture of a dead person hearing his voice. Only, this time it's not a picture. That is the miracle. You all know that dead bodies don't hear sound. With a living ear, sound enters and is converted into electrical impulses that our brains interpret. Well, sound can enter the ears of dead person. But it's not converted into electrical impulses. There is no brain function to interpret it. Dead ears can't hear anything. Now we have a sentimental view of this in our country. People go to the cemetery and talk to their loved ones there. Some of them even believe that those dear departed can hear them. They can't, but we like to think that

way. But even the most sentimental of us does not imagine that dead ears buried under six feet of earth and encased in a coffin can actually process sound.

But Jesus says those ears will hear. Not because of any ability that still resides in them, but because of the power of his voice. The voice of the Son of God will call and the souls in heaven and in hell will return to their bodies and they will all rise from the grave. On that day, we will see how great his power is. Every person who has ever died will be called back to life. Every body buried in every grave or tomb all over the world, every body that has already turned to dust or burned to ash, every body that has been lost at sea will be recovered and they will all live again.

That is truly a miracle. How can God know what dust to gather into which person who died thousands of years ago? How can God remember and recover all the billions of people who've already died? How can there be enough matter on this planet to give all of us bodies again? I don't know. But I don't have to know because I don't have to do it. The Son of God will do this miracle.

Then he will gather all people who have ever lived – including those who still live – and he will judge them. For those who did not trust in him when their lives ended, that judgment will be terrible. Body and soul they will go to hell, where they will suffer and be separated from all light and love and joy forever. But for you and me, the judgment of Christ is not scary. Because we will not have to explain how we really were good people, and when we messed up, we usually had a good reason and even when we didn't, anybody can understand why we did and said the things we did. That's not what we're going to argue. In fact, we're not going to argue at all. We will simply stand there and wait while Jesus opens the books that contain the record of every word we've ever spoken and every deed we've ever done and every thought and feeling that's ever passed through our minds and hearts.

Then he will render the verdict. And do you know what it's going to be? That we were perfect. That we never had a single sinful thought or feeling. That we never spoke an evil word or committed a selfish act. Why will that be the verdict? Not because we're such swell people. Not because we come here regularly and bring an offering. Not because you can understand why we did all the sinful things we did. Jesus will find us not guilty because he will find the faith that he gave us. So he will rule that our record is clean, because his blood erased every line in those books that told of our sinful words or deeds or thoughts or feelings. He will find that we had perfect hearts and perfect lives because he did, all his life long. And he gave us his perfect heart and life when he gave us our faith.

Then we will live with him. These bodies will live with him. Not as we know them now. But in glory. We will live with him in perfect joy, with perfect hearts and perfect minds and perfect love for God and for each other forever. And will sing his praises forever. And you know what? We'll actually like that. We'll love the hymns he chooses. It will be our greatest joy to sing to our Lord. **The greatest miracle is giving life to the dead. Jesus will give us life on Judgment Day.**

For many, many people, that miracle seems impossible. The people who heard Jesus say these things struggled to accept them. But this is no internet hoax. This is no fairy tale story told to people who can't accept the reality of death. This is the voice of our Savior, the very voice that will call us out of the grave, if we die before he returns. All that it says is true. This is what Jesus will do for you. Amen.