

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. ²⁸ “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. ³⁷ But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” (Luke 20:27-38)

The Dead in Christ will Rise

This past week, some students from Michigan Lutheran Seminary visited our school and re-enacted a scene from the musical that MLS put on this year. Talking about an effort to revive a theater, one of the characters quipped, “In the last two thousand years, there’s only been one resurrection, and that wasn’t a theater!” Of course, that drew a laugh. But some of the kids in our school pointed out that line is not accurate. The one resurrection, of course, is that of Jesus. But the Bible records Jesus and the apostles raising several other people. Every one of those resurrections points to a greater resurrection: the one that’s coming on Judgment Day. That truth leads us to the words that Jesus spoke in our gospel lesson for today. He made clear that these bodies rising from the dead is exactly what God promises us. My friend, **the dead in Christ will rise.**

I.

I once taught a Bible Information Class to a young couple. And when we got to this promise, the wife asked me, “Pastor, are you saying our bodies are going to come back to life?” She had never even heard that before. In our culture, almost all Americans believe in some kind of life after death. But most Americans think in terms of another plane of existence. In the Harry Potter novels – which are British, but which were enormously popular here – Albus Dumbledore, the guiding influence in Harry’s life, makes the statement, “To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.” Most people today do expect to live on after dying, but not here. They really don’t think in terms of these bodies coming back to life. But that’s exactly what Jesus promises us. **The dead in Christ will rise. How do we know that?**

Jesus proved it the same way that I would prove it: with the Scriptures. Jesus spoke these words just days before he himself died. One after another, his enemies challenged him with hard questions, designed to discredit him. They wanted a sound bite that they could use to ruin his popularity. In our text for today, the Sadducees took their turn. Who were the Sadducees? They were the religious party of the ruling elite. The Sadducees considered themselves to be the smart people, the people who wouldn’t be taken in by populist preaching. Like many people who consider themselves to be the smart people today, they didn’t buy into everything that their church taught. They rejected most of the Old Testament. They only accepted the five books of Moses. They didn’t believe in angels or demons or spirits of any kind. They rejected the idea of a physical resurrection. It just didn’t make sense to them.

They knew that Jesus taught the resurrection. So they came up with a question they thought would leave Jesus sputtering and looking foolish. They referenced a law of Moses that says that if a man married and then died without having children, his brother was supposed to marry his widow and have at least one child in his brother’s name. That child would be legally considered to be the child and heir of the brother who died. That law might raise all kinds of questions for us, but the point here is the question they then asked. They pointed to a family which had seven brothers. The first brother married and then died. Each brother married the woman in turn and tried to fulfill the requirement to raise up offspring in their brothers’ names. But they all died childless and so did the woman. Then came the question: **“At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”**

Now, even for us who accept the resurrection, the situation they point to could raise questions about life after the resurrection. But the only reason they asked the question was to make the idea of a bodily resurrection look ridiculous. And people do the same thing today. I had a friend in the army who told me that Christians invent a Disneyland in the sky because they cannot deal with the reality of death. If you went on line, you could probably find thousands of websites that pick apart Christian beliefs regarding the resurrection and state them in way that's calculated to make what we believe seem absolutely foolish.

How are we going to answer? The only thing a Christian can do: appeal to the Bible. What does God say? That's what Jesus did, too. But ever since I was a child, I've wondered why Jesus picked this particular passage. I mean, even in the Old Testament there are many clearer statements about the resurrection than the one Jesus used. But he didn't pick any of those. Instead, he said, **"But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."**

Why did he pick this passage? Because the Sadducees rejected Isaiah and Daniel and all the rest of the Old Testament. And sadly, as many scholars do today, the Sadducees jumped on the fact that Moses never says, "The dead will rise" in so many words and they insisted that he never heard of such a teaching. So Jesus pointed to a passage from the book of Exodus to show that Moses did in fact believe in the resurrection of the dead, even though God never inspired him to record a sermon about it. "The account of the bush" is when God called Moses to go to Egypt and free his people. These are words that God spoke directly to Moses. He called himself, **"the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."** All those people died hundreds of years before Moses was born. But God still called himself their God. Everywhere in the Old Testament, when God says that he is someone's God, he means that they trust in him. So Jesus drew the inevitable conclusion: they were still alive. Even though no one on this earth could see them, to God they were alive because they were in heaven with him.

Now, admittedly, Jesus was not pointing specifically to the resurrection to prove his point. He actually was pointing to the fact that the saints are in heaven right now, which is before the resurrection. But the Sadducees didn't argue with him because they believe in life after death at all. The truth is, going to heaven only matters because we are going to rise from the dead. It's a stop on the trip to the final victory – a very important stop, to be sure. But a stop none the less.

The world hasn't really changed. The devil keeps recycling and repackaging the same old attacks. Today, the world is full of people who don't believe in the resurrection and even many of those who believe in some kind of life after death do not believe in what God actually promises us: the dead in Christ will rise. Why does that matter? Because it is the heart of our faith. Jesus doesn't let sin win. We have faith today because he defeated sin in our hearts. That faith is in the final victory. We do go to heaven when we die; death doesn't win. And sin and death don't get to keep our bodies. They don't get to keep the world we live in. Jesus is going to come back and raise the dead and remake the world and undo all that sin does to us.

So we don't go to heaven with all the scars of this life. Think about how Hollywood likes to portray the dead in the afterlife: they're still wearing what they wore the moment they died. They're still the same age. They look the way they looked after the car hit them or the cancer got them or old age caught up with them. Those things are sin and death. They only exist in this world because our sin has corrupted this world. But God's promise to us in Christ is total victory over sin and death. We aren't punished for it. And we are freed from all that it does to us, from all that it does to this world. We will rise and live. That is the Christian hope. That is the goal of all God promises us.

II.

Do we modern Christians think about the resurrection? Or do we only talk about and think about "going to heaven"? You'll never find that expression anywhere in the Bible. Now, the Bible absolutely does teach that when we die we go to heaven. But the Bible emphasizes the resurrection in a way that we rarely do today, because the Bible wants to emphasize that final victory. But it's natural for us Christians to ask, "What then?" **The dead in Christ will rise. What will that be like?**

Jesus gives us a glimpse this morning. He speaks of **"those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead."** Of course, he means believers here. We are worthy of the resurrection because Jesus' blood has washed away all our sins and God sees us as holy and righteous through Christ. Jesus focuses on us because he wants to build up believers. He doesn't actually say anything

about unbelievers. They will rise, too, but not to enter eternal life. They will be reunited with their bodies and cast into hell forever. But we who trust in Jesus as the Savior from death and hell will rise and take part in that age, in the eternity of God.

Because of the question the Sadducees asked, Jesus says that we **“will neither marry nor be given in marriage.”** There are some things that belong only to this life. Marriage and presumably having children are examples of blessings only for this life. Jesus says that we will be like the angels, who also don't marry or have children. Now, I would like to believe that my wife and I will share a special kind of friendship in heaven because we were married here and we did share all the joys and sorrows of our lives here. I would like to believe that our children will still love us as their parents and that we will still love our parents in that age, and so perhaps we will have a special dimension to our relationship there. But we won't need the trappings of this life. We won't consider that change to be a loss. We will rejoice in the new way of life that God gives us there. We will have perfect fellowship with each other and with all the saints around the throne of God.

Jesus says that once we rise we can no longer die, again like the angels. He says we will be God's children since we will be children of the resurrection. Again, he's talking about undoing what sin does to us here. The ultimate punishment of sin is death and with death, hell. On the day that Adam and Eve sinned, they began to die. And once death entered God's creation, it brought with it all the pains and all the sorrows of this life. So once death is erased, we will be free from what death has done to us. There won't be a wrinkle on our bodies. There won't be a surgery scar. There won't be any emotional scars from the tragedies of this life. There will be no death at all and we will live forever with Christ. We will be God's children, gathered into a perfect family for all eternity.

We pastors like to use the image of a church family for our congregations because we all have this ideal of a family in our minds. In just a week and a half, we're going to celebrate Thanksgiving and then prep for Christmas and many of us have this image of the perfect family holiday engraved in our minds. That's ironic because most of us don't have perfect families. Most of us have black sheep in our families and unresolved hurt from our past. Some families, even in the church, barely speak to each other. Yet, that image remains in our minds. It even hurts a little bit, because we're angry that we can't get there. Well, the only perfect family is the one God gave us when he gave us faith. It is a perfect family because Jesus died and washed all our sins away and he rose and gave us his perfect life. When we look around us here, we don't see a perfect church family. We see sinners who hurt each other and argue and need to do the hard work of forgiving. We see sin that damns us all. But in the resurrection, this family will be perfect. And it will be our family. Our hearts will be scrubbed clean of every sin and weakness and temptation. We will love God and each other perfectly. And we will live in joy with Jesus.

That begins already when we go to heaven. Already at the moment we leave this life, we will be free of sin and begin to live like the angels. But we will be waiting for the last step, the restoration of Eden. These bodies will rise and live and be perfect. This world will be restored and be the paradise God created for Adam and Eve. And we will live in joy with Jesus forever. That is God's promise to you. That is our victory. We Christians will rise from the dead! Live in hope for that day. Amen.