

What is Resurrection For?

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Over the course of my ministry, I've had some very interesting conversations about resurrection. The promise of resurrection is foundational to our faith and it is a comfort and joy to believe that death does not have the final word. Last week we celebrated Remembrance Sunday and for those of us who have lost people we love, the promise of resurrection is a particular comfort.

But, it can also raise a lot of questions. What will resurrection be like? What awaits us after our bodies die? Will we have bodies in heaven? If so, which ones? One of my family members often talks about being excited to get her new body in heaven – a body free of aches and pains and disease. Will we be reunited with the people we have loved here on earth? Will we recognize each other? What about the people we haven't liked on earth? Will they be there too? Will there be days and hours like there are here? What will we do in heaven? Will we enjoy earthly things there like our favorite food or activities? In other words, we may be grateful for the comfort and joy of resurrection, but we have questions.

It turns out, we are not alone, people all through history have asked these questions including the Sadducees in today's scripture, though what happens in our scripture today is a bit more complicated. First of all, we are at a point in the story of Jesus' life, where the people in power are looking for ways to arrest him, but he is so popular, the powerful worry there will be a riot if they try. So, one idea is to try and discredit him and his teachings. Perhaps if they can make people think he is a fraud, the crowds will turn on him.

Enter the Sadducees. "Sadducees were a Jewish sect with close ties to the temple leadership... Sadducees differed from Pharisees, from Jesus, and from the Gospel writers in at least two key respects: first, they didn't believe in any coming age of resurrection, and second, they only recognized the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) as authoritative scripture — and it was commonly thought that those books, unlike others in the Hebrew scriptural library, don't attest to a resurrection. And so the Sadducees challenge Jesus on this specific point, essentially arguing that the doctrine of resurrection is absurd and unworkable."¹

Basically, the Sadducees have come to ask a trick question hoping to trip Jesus up and make him look foolish. Which we see plenty of in our time too, especially in our

¹ Salt <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost>

politics. People ask disingenuous questions meant to make other people look dumb or to trip them up with a misleading set of statistics or they phrase things in a way meant to make the other person look foolish. That's what's happening here.

And, as usual, Jesus' response to them teaches us several important things.

First, Jesus shows us how we can respond to those who are against us. He doesn't cower in fear because they are powerful or agree with them just to get along so he can avoid conflict and he doesn't try to trick them back. "Jesus doesn't deride or condemn the Sadducees, despite their adversarial intentions. Rather, he responds to them directly, citing scripture both sides hold in common."²

Jesus says: "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."

Which basically means: *You're asking the wrong question because you're assuming the wrong reality.* Resurrection life isn't a continuation of earthly life — it's a transformation. The relationships we know now will be fulfilled, not replicated. Marriage, for instance, is a good and holy gift of this age, but it points toward something greater — the eternal communion of God and His people. In the resurrection, our need for exclusive companionship, protection, and continuation of family lines will be fully met in the perfect love of God.

Then Jesus does something brilliant. He meets the Sadducees on their own turf — the Torah, the books of Moses. He says:

"Even Moses showed, in the story about the bush, that the dead are raised, when he speaks of the Lord as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*"

And then Jesus adds: "He is not God of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Notice the tense — *is*, not *was*. God's covenant relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn't end with their deaths. God's faithfulness endures beyond the grave.

Calmly and purposely, Jesus takes this trick question and stands it on its head. He shows that resurrection is not absurd and unworkable, but the gift of a loving God and outside of the limited understanding of our earthly selves. "Generally speaking, Jesus' teaching in this story functions as a word of caution against projecting our everyday experiences or cultural conventions onto what "resurrected life" does or doesn't mean.

² Thomas <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2440-children-of-the-resurrection>

Resurrection is a great mystery, and though we may indeed proclaim in broad strokes that God's love is stronger than death, we're wise to leave the finer details to God."³

This doesn't mean our wondering or questions are wrong or bad. Wondering and asking questions help us to grow our faith and consider new ideas and allow us to be honest with God. But, sometimes it means we're trying to compare apples and oranges, or maybe more like apples and elephants. Our understanding of life here on earth just doesn't allow us to make good comparisons about life beyond this life.

So first, Jesus defuses the conflict, seeks common ground and offers the Sadducees the opportunity to see something new about what resurrection really means - that it isn't just replication of this life but an entire transformation into a different reality.

But Jesus' teaching doesn't stop there. The other amazing thing Jesus shows us in this teaching is the freedom inherent in resurrection. The woman in this story is made up, but there were plenty of women who lived lives resembling this. This custom of widows being married to their husband's brothers was surely in part a way to protect the widow from ending up homeless, but she could have returned to her family of origin. Instead the tradition of being married to her husband's brother was done with the hope of her having children who could carry on her deceased husband's name and legacy. Marrying a woman off to her husband's brother was the way the patriarchal system ensured the deceased husband's line. In so doing, this custom treated women as mere property and reduced them to their ability to have children.

"If the Sadducees attempted to use ancient marriage practices to critique the idea of resurrection, Jesus effectively turns the tables, using his account of the resurrection to critique marriage practices of his day. (This is where Jesus gets radical) For please note, as Jesus tells it, the widow doesn't enter the age of resurrection as anyone's wife, much less anyone's property. Rather, she enters simply and emphatically as a "child of God," a "child of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36)."⁴

We may have questions about the resurrection and Jesus certainly doesn't answer all of them, by far, but he does make it clear that we enter into the next life free

³ Salt <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost>

⁴ Salt <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost>

of any of the constraints we've had here on earth, free of the ways we have been marginalized or boxed in by a role or label or made to feel less than.

Certainly, our earthly lives are a gift. Living in these bodies, experiencing the beauty and richness of this creation is a gift with lots of opportunities to grow in faith and wisdom. But, of course, these lives also come with great struggles, sadnesses and the opportunity to make a mess of things.

Eternal life, life after this, then, promises to reunite us with our creator in a way we can't even imagine but where we will be freed from all the suffering and struggles of this life. Resurrection is a freedom beyond all of those earthly constraints.

But that's where Jesus gets really radical. Because Jesus isn't saying resurrection is only for some future time. Resurrection isn't just after this life. Jesus invites us to see that we do not have to wait to know our identity as children of God. We are resurrection people now, not just in some future age. "for Jesus, "the age to come" isn't only "coming" — it's also *arriving* here and now, like the dawn at the beginning of the day. The new era, as Jesus puts it, has "come near"; it is already "among you," its inauguration already "fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 10:9; 17:21; 4:21). The cross will soon give way to the empty tomb, the first fruits of that coming age. And so whatever dignity, whatever freedom, whatever liberation awaits in the age of resurrection — begins today!"⁵

And if we are meant to see ourselves as "children of God," now, not property or people limited to a single social role"⁶ then "resurrection announces freedom here and now: freedom from systems that diminish our agency, freedom from expectations that shrink who we are created to be, freedom from the idea that our worth depends on whom we belong to."⁶

So maybe that's what Jesus was really inviting us to see — not just what happens *after* we die, but how we live *before* we do. The Sadducees came with a question meant to trap Him, and He answered with a truth meant to *free* us.

Jesus' words to the Sadducees still echo today: God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And that means: Every barrier that has ever bound us — every system that has diminished us, every lie that has told us we are not enough — is already losing its power. Resurrection is not only coming; it is here. It is here every time we see each

⁵ Salt <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost>

⁶ <https://pres-outlook.org/2025/10/twenty-second-sunday-after-pentecost-november-9-2025/>

other as children of God. It is here every time we love beyond fear. It is here every time we rise again — from grief, from despair, from the tombs we make for ourselves.

Friends, we are resurrection people. We belong to the God of the living. So let us live — freely, boldly, joyfully — as those who already share in the life that never ends. Amen.

^[1] Salt

^[2] Thomas

^[3] Salt

^[4] Salt

^[5] Salt

^[6] Salt

^[7] Presbyterian Outlook