

SERMON

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A little context is definitely in order. We've been on this journey to Jerusalem for a while – basically since June, right after Pentecost, as far as the lectionary is concerned. I don't know how many of those stories you've heard over the past few months, but almost everything that Jesus has done and said has been "on the road."

It's a narrative truth that has a figurative purpose when we think about discipleship. Make it an allegory about life and the parallels are pretty straight-forward. Life is the road we travel and while we're on it, we'll have the chance to teach a little, offer comfort and healing as we're able, meet up with those who are on similar journeys, witness to those who are on very different journeys...all the while heading toward (or from) the cross and empty tomb that stand at the center of the story.

Today's story happens on the road to the cross but we've skipped a couple of important details in this travel narrative. Jesus has **arrived** in Jerusalem. He didn't just arrive, find a hotel room, and get ready to teach some more; he entered in triumph with all the pomp and circumstance of a conquering king. The current secular authorities weren't too keen on that.

Not only did he resemble the conquering hero when he came through the gates to the roar of the crowd, but he went directly to the temple – the seat of sacred power (not that it was far removed from secular authority). The narrative isn't clear whether he got off the colt first, but he went into the temple and not-so-calmly drove out everyone there who was conducting the **business** of the temple.

"My house shall be a house of prayer,'
but you have made it a den of robbers."

The story continues...

⁴⁷ Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, ⁴⁸ but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard."

As you might imagine, the Sadducees – the ones who were specifically charged with the care and practices of the temple – were probably not in such a good mood as they come to Jesus in our story today. The Pharisees had already questioned his authority; in response he offered a parable about wicked tenants being evicted and replaced. He had rebuffed the attempt to trick him into sedition with a question about taxes.

Now the Sadducees come with this very important question of interpreting the Torah. This particular faction of the Jewish faith followed only the first 5 books of the bible, the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Can you guess what those 5 books say about resurrection? Nothing. That wasn't part of their understanding of being God's chosen.

This itinerant teacher, some would argue Jesus was in fact part of the Pharisaic movement, has taken over **their** temple, disrupting their faith practices and proclaiming a message that isn't theirs. So, they come with a very straightforward question. They turn to a clause of the law that says that if a man dies married, but childless, his brother must marry his widow.

It's important to note that this has a very practical purpose: the care of that widow. The law was put in place to provide support for her. It sounds a bit odd to modern ears, but it was very necessary in a culture where a woman's identity was entirely grounded in her life as wife and mother.

The Sadducees carry that very practical, real-world measure to the extreme to prove a point. They push the law to the absurd to show that it is absurd to believe in resurrection. Clearly, there can't be a resurrection because that same woman, after having survived seven husband/brothers would be stuck for all eternity with...all of them? In their attempt to disprove what they saw as absurd, they show us that God's promise is absurd.

Jesus turns to that same Pentateuch that the Sadducees hold onto to remind them that God said he **is** "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God didn't tell Moses he **was** the God of those ancestors. God **is** their God. If it's a present tense verb, so it's a present tense reality for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They must be alive so there must be a resurrection. God is God of the living.

That might seem like a matter of semantics that doesn't mean a whole lot today, but to those who heard it, it was proof enough for them. "Teacher, you have spoken well," some of them say. And they no longer dared to ask him another question.

The matter was settled – the resurrection is real. The Sadducees lost the argument and failed once again to stop Jesus. That day. The plot would deepen; all the opponents of Jesus would come together to "end" his movement on a cross. Where they failed once again.

While Jesus' words may have proven his point to that first audience, I'm not sure it does a very good job of answering **our** questions about the resurrection. You may be in the

position of having been widowed and remarried and you might just be wondering what that means for your eternal life. Or, at least, you might know someone – or several someones – who are in that position.

We gather here as a resurrection people and yet it's so hard to understand exactly what that promise means. We claim it in our creeds; we cling to it when we lose loved ones; we hope with all that we are that it is true. And yet we can't claim to have any clear idea of what it actually means. Short of when we experience that promise first hand, we simply don't know. I've shared before that I tend not to focus on life after death because I really believe knowing how it works is less important than believing in this life **that** it works. But that doesn't mean there aren't questions.

My Uncle Dickey died 20 years ago. He was 59 at the time and had lived his life with a mental disability. At his funeral, my dad gave a eulogy and spoke of being reunited with his brother some day in heaven and looking forward to seeing him again, **without that disability**. And those words have stuck with me ever since. He's my Uncle Dickey, his brain development stopped at about age 4. How would I recognize him if he weren't the same Sesame Street and pancake loving man I had grown up visiting in his room? Will he even **be** my Uncle Dickey if he doesn't behave the way I remember?

And then I remember that the next life is not this life. The resurrection that Jesus promised, the ones the Sadducees couldn't understand isn't going to be what we can comprehend. It isn't a matter of applying our laws and understandings to what God has told us will be. It's about recognizing the resurrection as a promise that God makes to be with us, in this life and the next.

This absurd question of the Sadducees is a reminder that the promise of God is so vast that we can't really put it in words. It's the questions of this life that matter. It's the promise that God has **claimed** us that matters. It's a reminder that **this** life matters. I appreciate the words of the famed African American poet Langston Hughes who wrote.

Life is for the living.

Death is for the dead.

Let life be like music.

And death a note unsaid.

Let's sing a song of life. Amen.