



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 10, 2019
JOB 19:23-27a; PSALM 17:1-9; 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-5, 13-17; LUKE 20:27-38

WORD PROBLEMS

Luke 20:27-38: *[Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus 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. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."]*

Jesus said to them, "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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."]

Over the years, our daughter has accumulated a number of study guides. She has ones you would expect: crash courses for the SAT, primers on math, and various study dictionaries. And then there is our favorite guide. It is also the one that gets used at our house. It's not your typical book though. Instead, the book contains real test questions and some of the best wrong (and humorous) answers students have given to those questions.

Here's a quick sampling:

Q: What is electronegativity?

A: The vibe robots give off when they are in a bad mood.

Or one of my favorites:

Q: What is pastoral farming?

A: Farming done by reverends. That shows up in other duties as assigned.

And then there is one appropriate for today's gospel:

Q: What miracle is celebrated by Christians on Easter?

A: Chocolate.

While chocolate is a miracle, I'm not sure that's what Jesus had in mind on the day of the resurrection.

While we chuckle now, there was no good-natured humor in the exchange between the Sadducees and Jesus. When the Sadducees pepper Jesus with questions, they have only one purpose in mind: to save their own lives at the expense of his. To do that, they must do everything possible to undermine Jesus and discredit his ministry.

We know so little about the Sadducees, but there are a few facts that are helpful this morning. First, they believed that Torah was the only scriptural authority for Jews. While the Pharisees sought ongoing interpretation of sacred scripture, the Sadducees believed that Torah contained all things and the *only* things necessary for salvation. That's why they get into this pedantic argument with Jesus about this poor woman and marriage. That's also why the idea of resurrection is impossible for them to believe. Not one of the 613 commandments of Mosaic law make reference to it directly.

The Sadducees were also considered the most elite class of Jews in Israel in first century Palestine. Many of them owned land in Israel which, somehow, they managed to hold on to during the Roman occupation. For generations, the Sadducees were also the caretakers of the Jerusalem Temple. In those ways, they held a lot of power and were the embodiment of aristocracy. They were the upper class who needed nothing yet longed for more. Yes, even if they wanted to believe,

resurrection held no power or new possibility for them.

There's one more detail that's important. When the Temple was destroyed in 70CE, so were the Sadducees. Except for the New Testament and Josephus's history, nothing else is written about them after that. After the Temple fell, they ceased to exist as a people forever.

Today, that's our key. The question the Sadducees pose to Jesus: maybe it isn't so pedantic after all. I think their issue wasn't really about this nameless, childless widow. Instead, maybe their question to Jesus was about their own existential crisis. I think they knew death was coming, and they were scared and confused and grieving this emerging reality.

Death has a way of focusing the mind. What the Sadducees' wrestle with is what we all wrestle with: how to find hope in the midst of crisis. What gives us hope? Is that hope self-contained, coming only from within us? Or can hope be open-ended, fed not only by us but also beyond us? When do we need to know, and when is it okay not to know?

In 2016, I went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the day my pilgrimage companions and I walked from the Mount of Olives to Gethesemane, these questions rose up for me in a special way. If you have been on that road, you know how steep it is. It is so steep that unless you pay close attention to every step, it is easy to slip on the road.

Such a fierce focus also means you pay attention to your own quiet reflections and the silence around you. When someone finally does talk, people pay special attention to what's said. For us, that silence was broken when someone asked Bishop Greg about the resurrection. A fellow pilgrim wanted to know what really happened? Was resurrection real? What did the bishop believe?

At that point, many of us moved in very close to hear the response. This is what the Bishop said: "I don't know what happened, at least not what the science it is of all. But I know something happened. Something profound happened in the lives of those disciples that changed them and the world. And we are here today because of it. And that's enough, at least for me." Just like that, we had come to the heart of the matter. One answer to the mystery every one of us wonders about.

What is the resurrection? On Easter Day, we celebrate the glorious feast of Jesus's rising to new life and his triumph over death. Every Sunday, we gather around this table to participate in Christ's dying and rising to new life. ...and just to be extra sure, through the Creeds, we affirm our belief in Christ's resurrection...twice! We stake our faith and our lives on this idea. But what is this mystery? Is only about mortal death, or can profound change happen through everyday life?

We will each experience our own answers to those questions. That's what makes it a mystery! While that may be, there are some common threads to our collective experience. Resurrection involves some kind of change. But it's no ordinary change. Those changes happen through the subtle shifts of life and in the profound upheavals brought on by unwelcome news. Those kinds of changes are dangerous and risky. They are also permanent. We can never go back to the way things were before. While life changes, it does not end. Somehow, something fundamentally new rises from what has been before. While resurrection stretches beyond our own control, it never extends beyond God's. Instead, like grace, it is freely offered by God as God's gift to and for all of us.

If you choose to embrace it this way, every moment holds the possibility for that kind of resurrection. When we start to understand this, everything changes. As Joan Chittister says, "life as we once knew it, defined it, shaped it...life rises redefined. ... That kind of change changes everybody. Relationships shift. Expectations alter. Insights deepen. We begin to see as we've never seen before."¹ That's when life begins...once again every day.

In just a few minutes we will present and bless financial commitments for the upcoming year. These are tangible gifts that make possible the ministry and mission of this sacred Cathedral community.

¹Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2013), 135.

There's a practical aspect to what we do today: these pledges help balance the Cathedral's ongoing annual operating budget. That's no small thing, and I want to say thank to all of you for that. But that's not the only thing these commitments represent. They also are an offering. That offering includes part of you and me, really everyone who engages with this Cathedral in some way.

We surrender part of ourselves to something far beyond each of us through those pledges, and we are changed because of it. For some, that change will be subtle, almost unnoticeable. For others, that change will

cause some seismic shift in how you see the world. When that shift happens, there's no going back. That how resurrection happens.

...and, these commitments are a sign of hope. Through Jesus, we are gathered together and partner with God in God's work of reconciliation, justice and love. That kind of hope promises that something new will spring forth from the abyss of disappointment, loneliness, and death. That is the kind of hope that this Cathedral is about: to be a beacon on the hill and for this city, proclaiming the love of the living God. May that be so this day and always. AMEN.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!