

The Hope of Glory

Luke 20:27-38

November 11, 2007

I.

Part of today's Gospel might make a good story in the tabloids, wouldn't it? Here is a woman who buried seven husbands, all brothers. Wouldn't this seem suspicious? Don't you think that by the time she got to the third or fourth brother, someone would have seen a pattern developing?

Well, this could be a sensational story if it was true. But obviously it's not a real story. It was just a hypothetical trick question by some people called Sadducees to try to make Jesus look foolish for teaching that we would be resurrected.

At this point I would like to briefly mention some background in two areas. The first involves the Sadducees, who were the high priests who served at the one, holy temple in Jerusalem, and were mostly aloof and not close to the people. They were to be distinguished from the Pharisees, who served in the synagogues, of which there were many throughout the land, and thus they had a better understanding of everyday life.

For this reason the Pharisees are much more prominent in the New Testament than the Sadducees, and they had more interaction with Jesus. Today, however, the Sadducees asked Jesus the question

There also was a significant theological difference between the groups that is central to today's reading. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection or the afterlife.

This leads to the second background point, which is the importance of the distinctions that characterize ideas about reincarnation, immortality, and resurrection.

Reincarnation is the theory that after we die we come back to earth and live another life until we die again, after which we come back again to a new life on earth, and so on. Reincarnation has no theological foundation whatsoever. It doesn't work that way. We did not have prior lives.

Immortality is the notion that our bodies die but our souls do not, and continue to live forever in some sort of out-of-body state. The ancient Greeks held such a belief, and today there are new age and eastern cults and religions that proclaim this view. But again, permanent separation of our souls from our bodies is not the Christian belief.

We believe in the resurrection of the dead, which is the actual resurrection of the body, one time, forever. This is the Easter message of Jesus' resurrection. We believe we will be bodily resurrected in heaven eternally, and will not be reincarnated in some endless cycle of coming to life back on earth. And we believe that we will have bodies in the afterlife, and will not just be eternal nebulous, shapeless souls that live on with no bodies.

II.

So, with that, let's look at our reading. The Sadducees, who rejected the resurrection, gave Jesus an absurd hypothetical question about one woman having seven husbands, all brothers. This was based on the law of Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy (25:5) that a man must marry his brother's widow if she had no son so that she might then have a son to carry on the deceased brother's name. At this time in Jewish history men could have multiple wives.

And the idea behind their loaded question was that it would be foolish to think that in the afterlife one resurrected woman could have seven resurrected husbands, and so the implication of their question was that Jesus' teachings about the resurrection also must be false.

Jesus quickly pointed out the error of the Sadducees' assumptions. They thought the afterlife would just be an extension of this life. They thought that the ways in which we lived in this world also would be the ways in which we live in the next world. They believed, for example, that if people were married on earth, that legal status of marriage would continue in heaven.

Jesus explained otherwise. He said that in the resurrection we neither marry nor are given in marriage. He said that we could not die anymore, and would be like angels in the sense of being children of God. He said we would be an entirely different order of being in heaven.

So Jesus did not question the Sadducees' logic, but rather the basic assumption on which their logic was based. He said that life in heaven is not just a bigger and better version of life on earth. The afterlife does not follow the patterns of this life. As a result, because we never die, for example, there is no need to produce children. One of the basic purposes of earthly marriage would no longer exist.

III.

So what do we think about this? Don't we hope that we will be reunited with our husbands and wives in heaven? Don't we believe that our friends and relatives who have gone on before will greet us and welcome us into heaven when we finish our time on earth?

Well, Jesus did not say that wouldn't happen. He did not say we would be separated from our loved ones in heaven. Although we know that our earthly marriage vows only endure until death do us part, Scripture tells us that love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8), and that we will rejoice in heaven (Jn. 4:36). As a result, there is every reason to believe that the love that we feel on earth, and the relationships we have on earth, will be even deeper and stronger in heaven.

So Jesus' message was good news; a message of hope. His basic point was that earthly institutions do not continue in heaven. There will be something even better. Heaven will be so different from anything we know on earth, or anything that we can imagine, that it is not even realistic to try to think of heaven in earthly terms.

We don't really know what heaven will be like, other than that we will live in God's presence. We can try to imagine some things. We certainly could say that there will not be any funeral directors in heaven because no one will die. There probably won't be doctors because there will be no sickness.

For obvious reasons there won't be lawyers, and courts, and law enforcement officers. We won't have home builders or real estate agents because God already has created the mansions in which we will dwell. We won't have insurance companies, or stock brokers, or financial advisors. We could go on and on with this type of speculation, couldn't we?

This reminds me of the story about the fellow visiting a dying friend in the hospital. They both had been avid golfers, and this fellow told his sick friend that if there was any way he could communicate with him after he died, to please let him know if there were golf courses in heaven.

The dying man passed on, and (please indulge me here) was given a one-time opportunity to communicate with his buddy on earth. He told him, "I have two things to say to you. The first is there indeed are golf courses in heaven. The second is that you have a tee time tomorrow."

The point here, which flows from what Jesus said, is that heaven is a mystery. Just as when we were young children we could not fully understand what it meant to be an adult, we now as adults cannot fully grasp what it will mean to be children again; children of God. We have no idea what it will be like or what we will do except insofar as that wondrous life is only partially revealed to us in Scripture.

For example, we do know that there will have rewards in heaven (Mt. 16:27, Rom 2:6, 1 Cor. 5:10). You heard a sermon that discussed this in September. And we also know we will have wondrous spiritual bodies in heaven. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that "there are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies," and that "the glory of the heavenly is one thing and that of the earthly is another" (15:40-41). He also said that "we are sown a physical body" and "raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44).

So we see that the resurrection of our bodies will not just be some sort of reanimation of our corpses. It will not be like when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life again because Lazarus eventually died. Rather it will be the recreation of ourselves in entirely new heavenly bodies. The weaknesses and infirmities of our earthly bodies will be no more. Throw away your glasses and your medicines. You won't need them. We will be different, and more marvelous and glorious because, as Jesus said, we will be like angels as God's children.

So, we should not be concerned if the way we lived on earth will not be the way we live in heaven. Not only will ideas of marriage and raising children be different, our entire manner of existence will have changed for the better.

IV.

Resurrection and eternal life. Monumental promises from God. They are at the core of our faith and central to our worship. If we did not have this sure and certain hope of living forever in God's presence, we probably would be doing something else this morning.

But we do believe and we do have faith even if we don't have all the answers. We look at creation all around us and know there is a creator. We experience the Holy Spirit in our lives, sometimes without even realizing it and sometimes calling it coincidence. We know, deep in our souls, that there is something special and different about humanity; that there is something out there calling to us.

And we know and sense and experience these things before we even open the Bible. What happens after we do that? Then we have an even better understanding of the mystery of God. As we read Scripture our faith in God and eternal life with him is strengthened, and yet we also know that we cannot rely on science, or logic, or our understanding of this world to explain it.

We know that God has greater things in store for us than we ever will experience on this earth, and we need not worry about whether the familiar and comforting things that we have here also will be with us in eternity. It will be far better than we can ever imagine. As Scripture tells us, the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard, and the human heart has not conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9). *Amen.*