

“We Too Shall Rise”

Liturgical Date: Proper 27 C

Primary Text: St. Luke 20:27-40, also 1 Corinthians 15:12-19; 35-44 (not assigned Epistle for the day)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel lesson from St. Luke 20 and includes several references to the Epistle from 1 Corinthians 15 as well. The title of the sermon is “We Too Shall Rise” just as Christ is risen from the dead, we too will be raised with a body that will live in eternal fellowship with the Lord.

Lets set the scene of the Gospel text in its wider context. Jesus has completed His long final journey to Jerusalem that stretched from Chapter 9:51 to the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday in Chapter 19. On Monday Jesus cleared the temple of the greedy moneychangers. Then on Tuesday of Holy Week Jesus is sparing with His opponents as the various groups of religious leaders opposing Him come with questions in an attempt to trap and trick Jesus. He had just masterfully answered a question from the scribes and chief priests about paying taxes to Cesar and now the Sadducees come to take their best shot. That the question involved the resurrection of the dead was very timely as in just a few days Jesus would prove that there is a resurrection from the dead on the first Easter Sunday-but of course the Sadducees did not know or believe that.

The Sadducees were a religious faction within Judaism that opposed Jesus. We don't hear nearly as much about them as the Pharisees and scribes, who also opposed Jesus. In fact, this is the only place in the Gospel of Luke where they are mentioned by name. So who were these Sadducees and what did they believe? What was their problem with Jesus?

The question that the Sadducees ask reveals much about their theology as verse 27 tells us the Sadducees were, “those who deny that there is a resurrection.” The name “Sadducee” from its root Hebrew word means “righteous”. They were a much smaller faction numerically than the Pharisees-but a very influential one. The Sadducees were the elites of the day as they were educated, wealthy, and influential as they had a good many seats in the Sanhedrin Council. They were well connected politically including being more friendly with the occupying Romans. They tended to be materialistic and wanted to preserve the status quo as it was a very beneficial set up for them-which is one of the reasons they opposed Jesus who was anything but status quo.

How were the Pharisees and Sadducees different? In trying to relate this to our modern context, the Pharisees were theologically conservative and the Sadducees theologically liberal. The Pharisees believed the Scripture and in the supernatural, taking it much more literally. They looked for the Messiah to come. Their error was that they missed the main point of the Law, focusing on minute details and making laws were there were no laws. Mercy took a backseat to legalism. We can see this type of an overall-literal and legalistic approach today in some fundamentalist/legalistic groups.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, would be most like the theological liberals who control most mainline denominations today. They were more “respectable” to the ruling powers of the day and were very concerned with maintaining the rituals of the temple system and the sacrifices. They only accepted part of what we would call the Old Testament as authoritative-the 5 books of Moses. But they were very skeptical-even unbelieving-of the supernatural. The Sadducees rejected the belief in angels and demons,

miracles, did not long nearly as much for the Messiah, and denied a final judgment where the dead are raised and judged. So it has been said that the way to remember the Sadducees is by saying, “they were sad, you see.” As we heard in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “*If in **this life only** we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*” So the Sadducees were focused on the here and now rather than the afterlife or Messianic Kingdom. Although they held great influence as an elite minority, the people largely rejected the anti-supernatural teachings of the Sadducees and resented their collaboration with the Romans and thus the Pharisees were much more popular with the common folk.

Now that we have set the background of the exchange and understand the basic theology of the Sadducees, let's examine this interaction with Jesus. The question that they ask Jesus involves them painting a very unlikely scenario in verses 28-33. It is not too far off from those crazy questions people sometimes ask like, “Can God make a rock so big he can't lift it?” According to the Law of Moses (which the Sadducees saw as authoritative) laid out in Deuteronomy 25 if a married man died without fathering any children, his brother was obligated to marry his widowed wife. This, known as “levirate marriage” served two purposes: it would provide for the woman who now had no husband or children to care for her and it would allow for the deceased man's family name to continue-which was of key importance. So in the Sadducee's far-fetched scenario there is a family of seven brothers. The first brother marries, but dies without fathering children. Sounds plausible enough, but then each brother successively dies after marrying the first brother's wife all without having children-talk about a Black Widow! So the Sadducee's “gotcha” is that if this happened and the resurrection is

real as Jesus is saying, whom would the woman be married to when all the dead are raised to life?

Jesus gives an interesting answer. The parallel account of this event in St. Matthew and St. Mark have Jesus beginning his answer, “*You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God*” as a strong rebuke to these so-called experts who sadly denied God’s supernatural power. But here in St. Luke Jesus goes right into the issue at hand in verses 34-35 that in the resurrection-life eternal-that there is no such thing as marriage (“neither marry nor are given in marriage”) so the Sadducees objection is not valid. Now this is one of those passages where we can easily “miss the forest for the trees.” Jesus answer is one that catches our attention. But the ***main focus of the passage is not the lack of marriage in heaven, but the resurrection.*** But this is something you perhaps have wondered about, so lets address it briefly.

The fact that there is no marriage in heaven hits different people in different ways. For some it is great news such as a dialogue I once saw on a sitcom. The wife says, “honey don’t you want to be together forever in heaven?” to which the husband responds, “No way. I said to death do us part and after that my obligation is over!” But for many others it causes distress and confusion. Perhaps you were married previously, your first spouse died, and then you remarried. You may wonder about how this would work out in heaven (awkward!). Perhaps it distresses you greatly that in eternity you will no longer be married to the love of your life. A fellow Christian once told me that he asked his pastor about this passage and he was told that it is correct that he would not be married to his wife who had recently passed in heaven. Then he asked, “Well can I at least live next door to her?”

Well if you are worried about this, let me ease your fears. There is nothing in the Bible that would indicate we do not know our loved ones, including our spouses, in heaven. In fact it is quite the opposite. But then why no marriage in heaven? God instituted marriage on earth for primarily two benefits to creation: one is for procreation and the other is for companionship. So there is no need for marriage in heaven because there is no need for births to occur to keep life going as everyone in heaven lives eternally. Secondly, in heaven we have perfect fellowship, harmony, and unity with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ so there is no problem with companionship. Without going too much more into this, the bottom line is that we can trust God that our relationships in heaven are *even better* than the ones we have here on earth. In fact, heaven is referred to in Scripture as “the marriage feast of the lamb.” We are in perfect relationship with God and thus our relationships with our fellow believers are also without division and conflict.

In fact, Jesus’ answers bring great comfort to us in terms of our loved ones. He tells the Sadducees that believers after the resurrection never have to face death again. So we live eternally with God and our Christian loved ones. We will even fellowship with the great saints of the Bible and throughout history as Jesus references our Old Testament Lesson from Exodus 3 as evidence of the resurrection in bringing in references to Moses, Abraham, and Jacob (quoting from the Scripture that the Sadducees believed). He says in verse 38, “*Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live in him.*” And furthermore this resurrection is not only a spiritual one, but a physical one. With the resurrection on the Last Day we are not some type of ghost-like figures floating around on clouds. We have a body, just as Jesus had a body after He rose from the dead. He ate, talked,

touched, and spoke. In eternity we will do the same. Jesus' appearance was somewhat different, but He was clearly recognizable. Once we receive these glorified bodies, we will be able to physically embrace our loved ones who died in the faith: a faithful spouse, a beloved child that died too young, and close friends. This will be a day and time of rejoicing!

Now the exact nature of our spiritual bodies is a mystery, but we do know we have them. We do know that they are not tainted by the stain of sin. They never wear out nor die. The example of Jesus is enough for us to believe this, but St. Paul in 1 Corinthians makes it very clear as well. He speaks of our earthly bodies, the terrestrial, and our heavenly bodies, the celestial. We will have this glorified celestial body and it is good as verse 42 said, *“So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption.”*

The Sadducees thought they had a stumper for Jesus that would make Him look foolish, but as He did time and time again, Jesus answer is a spot-on, essentially a big “boom.” And He would not only tell them of the resurrection, in a few short days He would SHOW them a resurrection. Even the scribes who were opposing Jesus had to admit it was a good one (as they also opposed the Sadducees). Verse 40 closes, with *“For they no longer dared to ask him any question.”* Jesus silenced those skeptical Sadducees that day, but unfortunately the denial of the resurrection would continue to rear its ugly head through history-even from people who claimed to be believers. This is shown by St. Paul having to address the issue with the church in Corinth. It was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, which held the physical in disdain and many couldn't imagine why you would want some type of physical body in the afterlife. But he made it clear by connecting our resurrection with the resurrection of Jesus. If you deny

the resurrection of the dead then you are also denying the resurrection of Jesus and thus have an empty faith and are a false witness. And the theological heirs of the Sadducees have reared their ugly heads throughout history: some of the Enlightenment thinkers denied the supernatural, the higher critics who also denied or doubted the resurrection and complete accuracy of the Bible, and in our own day with those that seek to recast Christianity to “fit” better to worldly attitudes of the day. These “Sadducees” throughout history essentially reduce Jesus to a moral teacher.

But He is much more than that! He is the resurrected Savior! He rose from the dead and so will we. We too shall rise! He is the God of the living and not the dead. It is also very important to note this: the only way we experience this eternal life is in Christ. I am *not* saying that everyone in the world experiences the joys of heaven automatically. Because of our sinful rebellion we are dead in our sins. Without the forgiveness of Christ won on the cross being applied to us, we will never experience eternal life—only eternal death. It is only in faith that we will experience the transformation and resurrection. Because Jesus lives, we believers too will live. We too shall rise. As we joyfully proclaim during the Easter season, we proclaim today:

Christ is Risen!

He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.