

“Disciples Live By Faith”

Luke 20: 5-19

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The tension is mounting in today's gospel story. By this part of Luke's gospel, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and it's not pretty. You'll remember that, as he approached the city a couple days before, he paused and wept over the peoples' failure to recognize him and his God-given mission. And then upon entering the city, Jesus went immediately to the temple, not to worship, but to drive from the property those who were selling sacrifices. It's quite clear Jesus knows at this point there's no turning back, there's nothing to lose that he's not already going to lose, and so he's using every minute that he has to teach, to challenge, to speak the truth no matter how unpopular it might be.

Our gospel passage for today picks up right after Jesus causes that scene in the temple. Not surprisingly, the Sadducees, the leaders of the temple, are out to get him. They think of all kinds of strategies, but they land on trying to disprove resurrection. So the Sadducees approach Jesus and say to him, “So say there's a woman who marries a man, and this man is one of seven brothers. When this woman's husband dies before giving her a son, she, according to the laws, will have to marry his next younger brother. Then when that brother also dies before giving her a child, she will have to marry the next youngest brother. And so on, until she's married and buried all of these brothers. Eventually,” they say to Jesus, “this woman will also die, so which of these seven men will she be married to in the life of resurrection?”

Now the Sadducees aren't wrong about the law that pertains to childless widows – this law came from one of the hundreds of laws that you'll find in Deuteronomy, and it was put in place to insure that a widow would have a man to belong to should her husband die without giving her a son, and while this sounds like protection put in place for women, it was really protection for the family name, a guarantee that it would live on no matter who lived or died. But the Sadducees' motivation here is not to tease out this ancient law; they're using the law to try to prove to Jesus how laughable resurrection is.

Jesus, like usual, refuses to take the bait. He thinks the entire premise of their question is wrong. He thinks their conception of God is too small. And what's especially troubling to him is the way they're trying to transfer onto resurrection life the laws and rules that govern life on this side of heaven, as though nothing changes when we cross into eternal life with God. The Sadducees are right that this law doesn't work very well in the life of resurrection; this poor woman would have seven husbands, all of whom also happen to be brothers to each other. That certainly doesn't sound like a reunion I want to be a part of. But here's the thing: have the Sadducees misunderstood resurrection, or is what they've misunderstood the fact there's a place where human knowledge ends and God's knowledge begins? Could it be that the whole endeavor to try to understand exactly what life after death is like, using the categories, and titles, and laws that we know on this side – could it be that it's not for us to do?

The first thing Jesus says in response to these snarky Sadducees is – “The children of the age to come will be like angels and will be called children of God.” In typical Jesus form, he doesn't directly answer their question; but he answers it enough to make a point: that resurrection is God's domain. It's life lived in the

fullness of God; it's another reality all together, where life and time, identities and relationships are based not on what we know but on what God knows. In other words, we as mere, human mortals are not supposed to understand resurrection. And when Jesus encounters skeptics, people like these Sadducees and probably you and I at some point in time, too, Jesus doesn't give us a manual for what we can expect to find on the other side. He doesn't threaten anyone with a "last chance" invitation. He certainly doesn't encourage anyone to waste their time trying to figure out who's in and who's out. That simply isn't up for debate if the love of God is at the center. Jesus says that resurrection belongs to God. And Jesus, throughout his ministry, also gives us enough of a taste to know that the life to come is going to be beautiful and peaceful and one big, giant reunion.

So that's Jesus' first point here - Resurrection is on God. Not on us. We don't have to understand it to trust it. Our theme for today - disciples live by faith. We put our lives and whatever is to come in the hands of God. And then Jesus makes this turn, and at the end of the passage, he says- "Our God is a God of the living." Our God is a God of the living. And what I take Jesus to be saying here, especially because we know he's speaking to these religious leaders who are all wound up about how things work in the afterlife - what I take him to be saying to them is - focus on this life ; let my love help you know what it is to be truly alive in this life. God is among you because God is among the living. And the same God who makes resurrection possible is a God who saturates life right now with God's power and love and redemption.

As a pastor, I have the privilege of being with people when they are nearing the threshold between this life and the life that is to come. Whenever I'm invited into that space, I go in fully believing it's among the most sacred of spaces, no

matter how it goes, no matter what is said or not said. Today the words of Jesus move me to tell you about two experiences that have happened over the last month as I've sat near the bedsides of two of our own, Sally Nelson and Jim Weaver. Sally and I shared a lovely conversation the day before she was to go in for an operation. Her doctor had told her that there was some risk involved in the procedure, so she was under no illusion that it could either help her or it could end her life. She had it in her to try, and as we were talking about it, she looked at me and said in the most matter-of-fact way, "either way I'll be okay." We both paused to honor the truth she had just spoken, and the witness that it was to the faith within her. Then we continued to talk about her life, she told some great stories and shared what it was like to be mom to four boys – she gave me some good perspective there. At the end of our time together, Sally and I prayed, I gave her a blessing, and then before I could stand up, Sally leaned over and put her frail hands on my cheeks and pulled me close to her face. She looked me straight in the eyes, and with every ounce of strength left in her body and in her voice, she said, "Peace be with you." There was urgency in her voice, and in the way her hands gripped on to my face; it was almost like she was saying "you need this way more than I need it at this point." That day I walked out of Rosewood Care Center, I walked out those doors to keep on living, but living feels different after you receive a word of peace from someone who's journey on earth is coming to an end.

And then just a little over a week later, I went over to the Weaver's house to be with our brother, Jim, someone whose life, as many of you know, went from diagnosis to death very quickly. I shared this story at his memorial service last week, too, but it's too good not to share again today. The last time I saw Jim was

on a Thursday afternoon, just a matter of hours before he would take his last breath. By that point, Jim really wasn't able to communicate at all. We sang around his bed, read scripture and prayed, allowed for silence and tears to have their place, too; and then, as I was getting ready to say goodbye, I leaned in close to his ears, and I said to him, "Jim, thank you for being a witness to God's love for all people." And in that moment, Jim was somehow able to nod and say, "for everyone."

This is the witness, friends. The witness of the saints among us, who knew these truths about God – the peace of God that grounds us no matter what we face, the love of God that makes room for everyone – Sally and Jim knew these truths from their living, from living their life here in God. And then, in the days and hours before they would join God in the life of resurrection, there they were, still uttering hopes for this life, passing on the power of faith to us, the living. That's what it is to trust resurrection when our lives come to an end, and that's what it is to live by faith every day we find ourselves still alive on this earth.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.