



Reverend Dr. Gabrielle Thomas
Sermon on the Resurrection, 2020
Focal Scripture: Luke 20:27-40

Through the written word
and the spoken word,
may we know your Living Word
Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen

The question, directed to Jesus in this evening's Gospel reading, is designed to trip him up.

The Sadducees, who do not even believe in the resurrection, present Jesus with a rather ridiculous case study. With highly active imaginations, they offer to Jesus the rather unbelievable scenario in which seven brothers die consecutively and a woman is passed on in marriage through each of them. At the end of all these marriages and deaths, the question in our passage is 'In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?' I have to say, over the years, on the many occasions I've read and studied this passage, concern about whose wife this poor woman will be, has never been the first question at the forefront of my mind!

When we hear a text like this, it's hard to miss the plethora of wonderfully controversial themes:

- First, we have the ethics of a woman being passed on in marriage – we could spend a great deal of sermon time talking about the issues around this! It refers, of course, to Deuteronomy 25, in which if a man dies and leaves his widow childless, his younger brother is compelled to marry her in order to perpetuate the dead brother's name.

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. ⁷ However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me." ⁸ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," ⁹ his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." ¹⁰ That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled. (NRSV)

- Plenty we could say about that!

- Secondly, this passage is tricky because marriage is temporary and is confined to life on earth. This temporality of marriage challenges our pastoral inclinations. I cannot tell you how many conversations I have had, whilst planning funerals, where a bereaved husband or wife wants to include a poem suggesting they will be one, once again, with their loved one in heaven. Not according to this passage. The Lukan Jesus has not taken pastoral care 101. Nevertheless, for many of us in ministry, this is challenging – because we live in a world which has bought into a sentimental narrative and confused it with the Gospel.
- Thirdly, ‘they are like angels’... in what way are humans like angels? We could spend hours deliberating over what the Christian tradition has to say about that! How humans are defunct angels and how the body is undervalued. My preferred interpretation hearkens to the Jewish apocalyptic belief that the resurrected body will be like that of an angel’s. In 1 Enoch, God does not give wives to the angels because they do not need to procreate. Instead then, according to Genesis 6, because they don’t have wives of their own they procreate with the ‘daughters of the earth’. The outcome is not good.

I’m going to focus on just one theme in what follows; namely, resurrection.

What controversy these 3 words have caused!

‘JESUS WAS RAISED!’

The resurrection is hotly debated within and without the Christian faith – possibly because it’s so astounding. Many learned people, throughout the course of history have contested the possibility of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Whether through lack of evidence or implausibility, the resurrection has been renounced again and again and many have argued that it is not in the least bit crucial, or necessary to the Christian faith.

Interestingly, it was a theme frequently discussed in Durham, because of a Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, was famously mis-reported to have said it did not happen, along with the virgin birth. Then, the following Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, or, N.T. Wright, as he is also known, went on to make “TV programmes which set out to prove the historical truth of the resurrection. He did this by visiting Jerusalem and using archaeology and witness statements from the gospels to build a fresh picture of Christ's death and resurrection” (quoted from the guardian newspaper).

For Anglicans in the pews in England, and it’s probably safe to assume, for many here too, whether we are talking about Jesus’ resurrection or our own, it’s a subject which at best, discussed with ambivalence. An

anthropologist of religion (Douglas Davies) in the department of Theology of Religion at Durham University, UK researched this, as part of a wider project on death. Only 4% of Anglicans in the U.K. believed in any kind of life beyond death, including that of Christ.

So, taking this forward, only 4% of the people saying the creeds believe them:

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

In accordance with the Scriptures.

For 96% of Anglicans, at least in the U.K., this simply is not believable.

And, we have a very big problem here.

Followers of Jesus, or, the Christian faith, exists precisely because numbers of witnesses testified to seeing, or even meeting with Christ, resurrected from the dead. The early disciples believed they saw Jesus dead, and after, saw him alive. What was the good news about otherwise? If Jesus is not raised from the dead, what IS the good news, otherwise?

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians:

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain...

It is worth pausing a moment and reminding ourselves that Paul was a first-century Jew. For Paul, living as he was in first-century Jewish culture, to speak of Jesus' resurrection is to claim that the general resurrection which many had been waiting for, had begun. In raising Jesus from the dead, God had begun something new.

Jesus' resurrection has changed the world forever. For Paul, the resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian faith because it begins the new creation.

The New Testament tells the story of a resurrection that changes history. The point here is that we are in a new phase, a new season. Because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead! As Rowan Williams puts it, "In this new and final phase of human history there is one and only one ultimate authority in the universe that we know: and that is Jesus. He has been set free from all that holds back the growth of humanity towards God.

He has been set free from the consequences of sin in the world, from the corruption, the downward spiral, of human history. He has been set free from death. He is alive, and there is nothing now that limits his action, his liberty. 'Christ, once raised from the dead is never going to die again', says St Paul in *Romans* 6. Because the Jesus whose resurrection has inaugurated the new age, who is alive and at large wherever he wants to be in this new context, *that's* a Jesus who can't just be contained in the terms of a human biography."

Therefore, a theology of the Church MUST take for granted the resurrection.

Put another way, without a belief in the resurrection we lose our theology of the Church.

Since everyone is used to me quoting folks from the fourth century, or, from British Anglicanism, I thought I'd turn to Martin Luther, who asks the question 'what is the good news – without the resurrection?' Luther writes that if a person does not believe in the resurrection they 'must deny the Gospel and everything that is proclaimed of Christ and of God. For all of this is linked together like a chain. Whoever denies this article must simultaneously deny far more...., in brief, that God is God.'¹ For the point is that only God can raise the dead and inaugurate this kind of hope. Only God can raise us from the dead, by grace.

And, this is good news, not only for those living in the first century, but for those of us still following Christ today. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." The good news is more than just our individual sins being forgiven, it is more than a vague optimism that things will be alright in the end. Rather, good news must include the news that we have a hope in life now, but one which reaches beyond death, beyond the grave, and that this is only possible because by grace we participate in the life of Christ. Living in light of the resurrection means that life matters now.

Paul, *Romans*: The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, God will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

So, by this logic, if only 4% Anglicans believe in resurrection, either Christ's or their own – that means 96% of Anglicans think death wins. So, instead, we are compelled to preach a message in which the best we can hope for is that Christ is with folks in their suffering,

- 'solidarity Jesus' is what I like to call this kind of messiah. The best we can hope for is that within the misery, the crucified Christ identifies with human pain. However, this is NOT the Gospel. It's not the sum

¹ Luther's Works XXXVIII: Commentaries on 1 Cor 7 and 15, pgs. 94-95.

of the story we are called to participate in and share about Christ. Jesus Christ did not remain in that grave. The last enemy he beat down was death. 'Solidarity Jesus', who sits in the grave ultimately does not offer any real hope. Seeing the one who was dead alive – this is hope. A story of life which reaches beyond death.

The Jesus who beats death, who has the final word,

'Resurrection Jesus'

- Now, that's a hope worth living.