

November 6, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Open us, Holy One, to your Word and your way. Clear our minds of daily distractions. Fill our hearts with the humility we need to hear and receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 20, verses 27 through 38.

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”

The word of the lord.

One of the podcasts I listen to regularly is a show called ‘The Daily’ – it’s a podcast from the New York Times, and it describes itself as a show that pursues the answers to big and urgent questions. Like, ‘What will be the impact of a giant piece of legislation’, or ‘what are the implications of a verdict in a major trial?’

A few months ago, they took a different approach and instead did an episode that explored some of the universe’s biggest questions. Not to find urgent answers, but to sit with the big, existential questions we don’t have answers to.

They explored questions like, what is a black hole? Is there other life in the universe? What’s the fate of the universe?

And then, they shared this question that Albert Einstein had famously asked, which was... Did God have any choice in creating the universe?

It kind of knocked me off my feet when I heard it because, well, I had never thought of that dilemma before. And as the episode went on, and they dived deeper into these big questions about the universe through the lens of physics, I came to realize that physics didn’t really seem all that different from theology. Both, perhaps at their core, just sought answers to questions that we don’t have the capacity to fully answer.

Our scripture for today, is at its core, about a question. A question that feels very strange and foreign. But an important question.

In our scripture, the Sadducees ask Jesus a question.

The Sadducees were a group of Jewish modern intellectuals at that time, who Luke tells us, did not believe in resurrection.

They recognized only the original five ‘book of Moses,’ or the torah, as fully authoritative and the resurrection of the dead is not referenced in the torah.

The Sadducees had primary authority over the temple and were among the religious upper elite. Their wealth and privilege made them far and distant from ordinary folks.

They wanted to challenge Jesus’ authority and credibility, so they ask him a question about resurrection and a widow who is married 7 times to 7 brothers. It feels like a strange and weird question because it’s supposed to.

The Sadducees ask an absurd question to show how absurd the idea of resurrection is. The question, itself, however, lies within a teaching from Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy about marriage, called levirate marriage.

In levirate marriage, a brother-in-law was required to continue his brother’s name by marrying his brother’s widow, if his brother died leaving his widow childless. The tradition was meant to ensure the family name would live on, but it also had an important ethical function.

In ancient patriarchal society women were vulnerable. They had no social security, no insurance, no opportunity for work. So, women who did not have a husband or a father or a son to care for them were destitute and unprotected and marginalized.

The biblical command to protect the widows, the poor, and the orphan springs from this stark reality. As patriarchal as it was, levirate marriage did also mean to protect these widows.

So, the Sadducees take this extreme, absurd case of levirate marriage, but one, nonetheless, supported within the torah – and throw it to Jesus and essentially say how do you explain that in resurrection?

What happens when they are all resurrected? Whose wife is she?

But Jesus is smart, he knows he is being tested and, in his answer, he exposes their ignorance. The Sadducees know nothing about resurrection because they ask the wrong question. The question they ask is not applicable to the resurrection because resurrection is not simply a continuation of earthly life.

The God who is making all things new is not bound by the constraints of the present in the age that is to come. Heaven and earth are not the same. The ways of this world and the ways of heaven, of the kingdom of God, are not the same.

The question, ‘whose wife will she be,’ ignores the radical newness of what is to come.

So this question, Jesus easily answers. But what the Sadducees really ask is a question that is not answered so easily. The question of resurrection.

I think the Sadducees do have it right in that resurrection is an absurd idea, an absurd question.

What happens when we are resurrected?

What does Heaven look like? What do our earthly relationships look like in heaven? These all lie within the absurdity of the Sadducees' question – and they are questions worth asking.

Jesus grounds these questions in a fundamental truth that the ways of God are not the ways of humanity. The ways of humanity are complicated, often cruel, sometimes beautiful, and utterly exhausting.

God is not bound to these ways. This is Good News.

Death will come for us all, and what death takes with it are the ways of the world. But in resurrection we who die to this world are fully made whole in the way of God. But the details, we're not given.

What resurrection, what heaven looks like? I don't know – except that it is unlike anything we do know. Because it is not of this world. It is of God.

God created this world out of love – this world is for us – the present is for us – but heaven is for God.

What lies beyond death is of God alone. It is God's glory in its purest. And it's something our mere mortal minds cannot comprehend.

But it doesn't mean the question isn't worth asking. Because when we ask these questions, we don't get the answers we seek... but we stumble along and perhaps discover we need more than answers.

Take Einstein. He asked that question about god and the universe. But when he was just 15 years old he asked a question that fueled his whole exploration and his monumental achievements that changed physics..

The question was: "If he was traveling along a light beam at the speed of light, what would he see?"

It sounds ridiculous, and he didn't get a definite answer. But his love of questions, bold questions, daring questions, ridiculous questions, and the joy he took in seeking answers, changed the world.

So, what is to come? Well, we know that the ways of this world are not the ways of God. And we do have a glimpse of God through our scriptures. Through the life of Christ. The ways of God are justice, love, mercy.

The ways of God are oppressive systems overturned where the least of these are raised high while the mighty are brought down from their thrones.

In these truths we get a hint. We find hope.

Jesus responds that those worthy of resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage. This can be a bit unsettling for many whom marriage has shaped their life in meaningful ways.

But first, it's important to name and understand that marriage in Jesus' time is nothing like marriage in our time.

Marriage was not for love, but essentially a social contract. Women were pawns, property, bought and sold through marriage. And they had no escape because they had no means of a livelihood outside of marriage.

So, there is no need for this understanding of marriage in heaven, where women are 'given' like property, because the ways of God are justice and equality.

No institution that oppresses and marginalized exists in the kingdom of God.

But what does exist is love. Relationships. These are the ways of God.

Love that can be found within marriage, and love that can be found outside of marriage.

We need not stop asking these questions. God does hold these answers, but we are naïve to assume we deserve them, or even need them.

For it's in the joy and possibility and imagination of questions that we find faith. Faith to ask and know that God holds these answers, whether we get them or not.

Perhaps that is why Christianity has persisted for thousands of years. For the love of questions that dive into the heart of the mystery that is life and this universe, and the hope and faith we find in these questions unanswered.

A hope and faith strong enough to endure whatever this mysterious life throws at us. And the God we find in questions unanswered.

I don't think Einstein found the answer to his question. Did God have any choice in creating the universe? Perhaps better understood – could the universe be anything than what it is? He didn't find the answer. But he believed in answers.

Writing about Einstein and his question, Dennis Overbye, states that "It is the job of scientists to believe in answers. But like card players with an incomplete knowledge of how the cards lie, physicists are forced to play their cards as if there were a way to win the game of science. Without faith that there is order, as Einstein pointed out, the enterprise is doomed anyway. But with that faith, as Einstein proved, it is possible to change the world."

It is our job as children of God, to believe in answers.

What is resurrection? What does heaven look like? What lies after death?

We have been asking these questions for a long time and we will keep asking them longer... but the faith in God that we have to believe in these answers has changed the world – and gives us joyous hope in the age that is to come.

And for that. **Thanks be to God.**