

Text: Luke 20: 27-40
Title: Resurrection Mechanics
Date: 11.06.22
Roger Allen Nelson

There are a couple consistent critiques of my preaching: One, that I'm fuzzy on hell. And two, that I'm not clear about heaven. Besides being too tied to my manuscript, having annoying habits (Still with me?), and not being practical enough, I don't say much about heaven or hell.

A few years a Hope saint was concerned that I didn't preach about heaven and gave me a 300-page book speculating on scripture's teaching about heaven. It had been meaningful and helpful for her – she wanted the same for me.

A 2021 Pew Research project revealed that 73% of American's believe in a heaven and 62% believe in a hell. While there was little consensus on how you get to either place – their existence was generally accepted.

What do you think?
What happens when we die?
What are we to make of heaven?

Marilynne Robinson, in her sublime novel "Gilead," records an old minister writing to his young son. He writes:

Boughton says that he has more ideas about heaven every day. He said, "Mainly I just think about the splendors of this world and multiply them by two. I'd multiply them by ten or twelve if I had the energy. But two is much more sufficient for my purposes." So he is just sitting there, multiplying the feel of the wind by two, multiplying the smell of the grass by two.

I'm reminded of my first night as a counselor at a church camp. I was in a cabin of junior high boys – who were making the sounds that junior high boys make – when from one dark corner one of them asked, "Will there be skateboards in heaven?"

My answer was something like, "Skateboards times infinity, dude."

What are we to make of heaven?
What happens when we die?

The Sadducees ask a similar question.

They go to Jesus for an answer about life after death. But rather than honest inquiry they pose an intellectual conundrum. They ask the equivalent of how many angels can tango on the head of a pin.

The Sadducees were part of the priestly cast in Israel. They had control over the rituals in the Jerusalem temple – which also made them power-brokers in the affairs of the state. They were something of a theologically conservative, wealthy, aristocracy. And, incidentally, when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. they disappeared without a trace.

But the Sadducees didn't believe in a resurrection at the *eschaton* ~ the last days. So, their question was little more than a trap for this upstart rabbi from the Galilean hills. They were looking to ensnare or embarrass Jesus by asking a mostly contrived question about the mechanics of the resurrection and the nature of the afterlife.

A little background here is helpful....

Levirate marriage – where a deceased man's brother is obligated to marry his brother's widow, and the widow is obligated to marry her deceased husband's brother – is prescribed in Deuteronomy. In some ways the law protected the welfare of the widow. She wasn't adrift without property or income. But it also underlines that women were a kind of property and that their identity was measured by who they married and their value by the children they bore.

The Sadducees assumed that if there was a resurrection (or a heaven) it would simply be an extension of present realities. So, their question about what to do with this wife of seven-dead-brothers is meant to wedge Jesus into a dark-befuddled-corner.

But Jesus turns their question on its head.

Jesus responds that their assumptions are dead wrong.

It's not this world resuscitated.

It's not this world restarted.

It's not this world reincarnated or without an expiration date.

It's this world resurrected.

It's this world transformed.

It's this world turned upside down.

It's a whole new world.

And our categories, imaginations, and ideas of multiplication don't hold up. Jesus disarms the Sadducees with a different assumption about the nature of the resurrection.

The point that Jesus makes is not that we won't know our spouses post resurrection. Rather, the very premise for marriage where women are property and their worth is connected to progeny is dismantled. In a resurrected world there will be no need for levirate laws – for there will be no death. Again, our categories, imaginations, and questions don't hold up because reality is different in the light of the resurrection....

In the words of William Willimon:

We really trivialize the resurrection if we characterize the resurrection as mainly an affirmation that, because Jesus was raised, we are guaranteed that we shall all go to heaven when we die. That makes the great, cosmic reversal of everything in the resurrection into a matter for individual immortality rather than the world-shattering cataclysmic event that the resurrection of the body really means.

Dear friends, the answer that the gospels provide to “What happens after we die?” is not a tale about our immortal souls, or the continuation of our spirits, or recycling, or reincarnation, or skateboards times infinity.

No. The *mysterium tremendum*, the profound mystery, is the resurrection! It’s not simply that the dead Jesus was alive again on Easter morning, but it’s that the fabric – the very nature – of this world is changed.

The Apostle Paul writes that the resurrection of Jesus is the “first fruits” of a great, final, triumphant new creation.

The resurrection is the down payment.

It kicks-in the door.

It changes the whole game.

Into a world where death held the last card, the resurrection of Jesus means that a whole new deck has been dealt. And, all of the vestiges of death: violence, hunger, fear, brutality, loneliness, lies, addiction, cancer.... all of that is passing. All of that is finally not finality.

Death is not the end.

Resurrection is the end.

And, in that end there will be some great *shalom* restoring resurrection! In the words of Karl Barth, “Christianity that is not thoroughly eschatological is not the faith of Jesus.”

Paul puts it this way:

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a human being. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But in this order: Christ, the first fruits; then when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

So, dear friends, no matter what vestige of death you know this morning, no matter what brokenness, no matter what the enemy....

It is not the victor,

it is not the final chapter,

it is not the last word.

No matter the death that we all go through – we are children of the resurrection. Our hope is in what comes next.

Now. I don’t know if that adequately answers questions about heaven. I do know that my cynical-secular friends think I am hanging onto magical-thinking that doesn’t fit reality as we know it.

And, I do know that my evangelical friends think I’ve lost my way because clearly if you believe in Jesus your ticket is punched to heaven. After all Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you shall be with me in paradise.”

And, by the way, I have not said that you won't go to heaven when you die. I hope that's part of creation's resurrected reality. (That my parents, who have both passed, are together in heaven – is one of my deepest hopes.)

But!

But, the emphasis of scripture, the answer of Jesus, and the heart of the gospel, is something radically, wonderfully, absurdly, and unbelievably different. The hope of the gospel is resurrection. And, I don't know how to relegate that to metaphor or moralism or magic simply because it seems absurd and I can't make it jibe with the world that I know....

What happens after we die?

I don't know....

But, I confess, hope, trust, believe in the resurrection.

And because of the resurrection, everything is different than what it seems.

So, dear friends, in the light of that resurrected reality, without fear and buoyed by hope, come to the table. For here there is a foretaste of a resurrected world where there is no longer any hunger or death or mourning or crying or pain – for the old order of things has passed away. And the one who sits on the throne says “I am making everything new!”

Children of the resurrection, come to the table of the resurrection.

Amen.