

“JUST A PEEK AT HEAVEN”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 20:27-38

Jesus had just finished silencing the Pharisees who also had Zealots and Herodians in their company. They had asked the question: “Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar or not?” If Jesus had answered yes, then the Zealots would condemn him. And if he said no, then the Herodians would arrest Him as a tax revolter. But Jesus, like usual, addressed the real issue behind the question by asking for a coin with Caesar’s head on it. He asked them to identify whose picture was on the coin. When they answered Caesar, He replied to give to Caesar what is His. More importantly, He told them to render to God what is His. He had escaped the trap in the question.

Then the Sadducees took a turn to trap Jesus with a question. We are clued in of their bad intentions with the words “*who say there is no resurrection.*” They preface the question with a story about seven brothers. The oldest married a woman but died without children. According to the Torah, the next eldest brother was to take the woman as a wife and beget a child in the place of his dead brother. To make it even more dramatic, it is said that there were seven brothers who all had the woman as wife and died without children. Then they asked Jesus the question: “*In the resurrection, whose wife will this woman be?*”

Their question was designed to draw Jesus into an argument based on Old Testament law. Deuteronomy 25:5 commanded a man to marry his brother’s wife if the brother died. If they had a son, the son was to be named after the deceased brother. The Sadducees asked which of the seven brothers would be married to the widow in the resurrection.

The question reflected the common feeling toward women at that time. Women were seen as being no better than property. They had few rights and could be divorced by their husbands for petty reasons. Widows were in an even worse situation if they had no sons to look after them.

They were not asking Jesus to judge between the claims of the seven brothers in the resurrection. After all, they did not believe in a resurrection. What they were really trying to do is to ridicule the idea of the resurrection. What kind of heaven would it be if all sorts of disputes like this had to be settled? Jesus could have answered, for example, that the oldest brother was to have her because he was the oldest. Then the answer would be: "That's not fair to the other six!" The question was meant to trap Jesus.

Jesus was quick to poke holes in the Sadducees' logic. They were talking in human terms, but Jesus and God always talk in heavenly terms. Remember that God's ways are not our ways and sometimes His ways are hard for us to understand. Heaven is a Godly concept that we can't easily understand. Jesus does not give us a definite description of what heaven is like, but he does tell us that life in heaven will not be a continuation of life here on earth. It will be different. There will be no marriage, no property or worrying about property. Jesus also says that the only part of our earthly life that will continue in heaven is that we will continue to be children of God. When we die, we will fall into his arms and he will never let us go.

In our earthly life, marriage and procreation are necessary for life to continue. In our heavenly life, we will never die, so we will never have to worry about property and who will inherit our property after we die. We can't prove the resurrection with rational arguments. We can't understand things we have not seen. We have to accept them by faith, just like we have to accept God's Word by faith. Even the world's greatest preachers have trouble understanding the Word of God. Billy Graham once had a struggle with the truth of God's Word, but one evening he knelt by a tree stump and declared to God that he would accept God's Word by faith.

Jesus commented on the Sadducees' rejection of the resurrection by referring to Moses. As the Sadducees only believed that the first five books of the Bible (The Torah) were inspired, Jesus answers them from the Torah. He proves that the Torah itself speaks of the resurrection and quotes the passage of Moses and the burning bush as an example. In this passage, God reveals Himself to Moses as "I AM that I AM." Yahweh is the eternally existent one, the source of all life, the Creator of heaven and earth. All things live by Him and for Him. He is the one who created man from the dust of the earth. And what is more, He is the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Scripture does not say “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The present tense of the verb says that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive, even though they had died and were buried in the past. The Sadducees were silenced. The Gospels state that from that point, no one else dared ask a question.

The Gospel message is not about a continuation. It is about a new life. Jesus’ death and resurrection makes this new life possible. It is better than anything our current life can offer. It is a new birth, a new age, the unveiled sight of God. Heaven is God’s responsibility, not ours. Our responsibility is how we live our lives here and now. We have no idea what’s coming in the next life, no way to imagine how the next life will be even richer than the life we know now.

When we stop worrying about life after death, our lives will take on a new direction and a new energy. We will see the world with eyes that see God at our side as we face life’s challenges. It is appropriate that we are hearing this reading at this time in the church year. Three weeks from today we will enter the season of Advent, which begins a new church year. As we conclude our church year and look toward what is to come, our readings focus on what is to come. Christian faith is about living, loving God and loving people.

It’s sometimes hard for us to believe in the big things in life when we have so many little issues and struggles that we let take up lots of space in our lives. When we are obsessed with the little things in life, it’s not easy for us to step back and understand everlasting life. We can only imagine what heaven will be like. Some people imagine it as a beautiful place with endless good times. Others imagine it as a place where there will be no sickness, old age or pain. Our ability to imagine what heaven will be like is our way of expressing our faith that our loved ones are alive and well and are getting along with each other.

C.S. Lewis, who wrote “The Chronicles of Narnia”, once told the story of a woman who was thrown into a dungeon. Her only light came from a barred window high above. She gave birth to a son, who had never seen the outside world. He couldn’t reach the window to see outside, so his mother told him about green fields and waves crashing on the shore, but he couldn’t imagine what she was describing. Eventually, she persuaded the guards to give her some paper and charcoal so she

could draw pictures to show her son what the outside world was really like, but what the boy came to understand was that the outside world looked like black lines on a white piece of paper. We can't even imagine!

Those who are willing to give their lives to God now will find that God will be there for them when the journey of their earthly life is over. We are to love one another just as God loves us and share God's love for people in a way that excludes no one.

If God is our God, and we are His people, death is not the end of the story. It is the beginning. Someone once said that "today is the first day of the rest of your life" and that will be especially true on the day we die. When we die, the Lord will not abandon us. He will be there to greet us. To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord. We have Christ's promise of the reality of the resurrection through Christ's own death and resurrection. Because he lives, we too shall live. Living without a belief in the resurrection, or the hope it offers, cheapens this life.

The Gospel passage is about the next life. It's about what happens after we die, especially if we are followers of Christ. For the Sadducees, death was the end of life's journey. Jesus reveals that God is a God of life and not a God of death. For believers, death is just the end of one phase of life and the beginning of a new, glorious life--a life that we can only barely begin to understand now and will completely understand when we sit at the Master's feet. The resurrection gives us hope.

In order for us to receive the hope and glory of the resurrection, we have to repent. Repentance gives us hope for the future. Paul argued that the process of resurrection and repentance began with Jesus' bodily resurrection. Resurrection is the start of a new life in heaven with Christ. Our dead, physical bodies will be raised spiritually to a new life.

In order for us to understand the resurrection, we have to expand our ideas about who and what God is and what we can do. Our imaginations can only go as far as charcoal on a piece of paper. But God's reality is so much bigger than we could ever hope for or even imagine. We can't limit God with our own limited human reasoning. God continually surprises us. The future God has planned for us is a glorious one that is *far more* than we can imagine and *different* from what we can imagine.