

In the Resurrection

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Congregation Member]

Our Gospel reading for today is Luke chapter 20 verses 27 through 38. It's on page 855:

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

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

When I was looking ahead in the Lectionary and saw what the Gospel reading was that one, I decided to bring in a guest preacher today [laughter]. No, that's not quite how it worked out but we do have a guest preacher today and I'm going to give you some of her really excellent bio here. Rose [Percy] is a graduate of Eastern Nazarene College, as are both of my parents, which I think is really interesting. During her time at ENC, Rose received the Paul E. Williams Leadership Award for her investment in social justice conversations within the ENC community. After college, Rose interned at Brockton Covenant Church, which is how I came to know her. Her pastoral duties included assisting with worship music and arts discipleship, preaching, and community organizing. She currently attends and is a local licensed pastor at Bethel Church of the Nazarene, and she's in her first year at Boston University School of Theology in the master

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of divinity program. Rose is also an artist, she's a musician, and a blogger, and a calligrapher. She's a very talented and gifted person and she has a wonderful vision of the Kingdom of God, which is informed by many things including her identity as a Haitian American woman. And so, I'm so glad that Rose is able to be with us today, and would you join me in welcoming her.

[Applause]

[Voice of Rose Percy]

Good morning, church.

[Congregation]

Good morning.

[Voice of Rose]

It was wonderful to worship with you all this morning. I typically have a rule that if I'm speaking, I try not to overdo it with the singing, but it was really hard not to because your worship team is amazing. So thank you all, worship team and thank you, Pastor Scott for inviting me here. And so, as Pastor Scott already introduced, this passage has been rather difficult [laughs]. But I have had a few experiences in the past couple weeks that I have tried to connect together to understand this passage. So I invite you to imagine a life without death or dying. I think about what it means for us to imagine that life. For so many of us in the room, you know, there are probably people here who have had to attend a funeral or two in the last year, or in the last two years, or last decade. And there are those of us who know that attending funerals can make death feel so final, and yet grief can feel so eternal. And this past Sunday at my home church, we celebrated All Saints' Day, and this was my first time ever taking part in a service like that. We devoted some time to remembering the saints and we allowed that time also be a time where those in the community who needed to mourn had space to mourn. And so I got to experience what it was like to listen to a sermon that illustrated and talked about some of our famous saints within the Christian tradition, but also to hear stories about people who have passed in our community long before I got there. We lit some candles as we came up for our communion, we returned to our seats, and we were asked to say the name of somebody that we wanted to remember together. And when the names were said, a bell was rung and we would blow out our candles. And although that was my first time experiencing All Saints' Day at my church, it wasn't the first time that week that I was invited to remember and to mourn the dead.

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In the weeks prior, we had heard so much about lives that were coming to an end too soon, In fact, a couple weeks ago a woman named Atatiana Jefferson was killed in her home after her neighbor made a call just as a welfare check, for the police to come to her house and just check on her. And there she was shot in front of her nephew who she was babysitting at the time. We heard the name Bennie Branch, another life that was taken. And Botham Jean's trial reminded us of the unfortunate circumstances of his death just a year ago where a police officer followed him to his apartment and killed him there. These things were heavy and dark, and were kind of ruminating within our community at the School of Theology. It's my fellow black classmates and fellow seminarians who had to write papers and go to class while thinking about whether our lives really matter, because we were facing a world where the narrative in the story was that our bodies didn't matter. So we began to think about how can we make space to remember those who had passed but also to voice our concerns for that hopelessness that we were feeling. And so we had a chapel service and a vigil on a Wednesday, and then Saturday came and we had a (I always struggle to pronounce this because I can't speak Spanish) Dia de Los Muertos. As part of that tradition celebrating the Day of the Dead, they prepare a table which they call the *ofrenda*, which is covered with pictures of those who had passed. And along with those pictures, there's food, and offerings, and mementos that remind you of those loved ones. So we came together that Saturday and remembered them and we held them in our hearts.

And something about that ritual, there's this belief that on that specific day, the dead are somehow spiritually closer to the earth and, therefore, there is an opportunity to connect with them. So in that ceremony, we said their names believing that as we say their names, everyone responds with "presente," meaning that they are here with us. And so it seems like all around for the past few weeks, this theme of death has just been kind of illuminating my part of the world and my community. So I wonder for this community how that theme has been showing up. Has there been a moment for you, Artisan Church, to mourn with those who need to mourn? And so we're moving from this theme of death towards this theme of resurrection, and I wonder what Jesus has planned through this message to lift the hearts of the weary this morning — those who need to find hope in a world where death doesn't happen or doesn't happen again. And so in Luke 20 verses 27-38 we have this question that is posed by the Sadducees which essentially is, at the resurrection whose wife will she be?

We have this concept from the old Hebrew Scriptures, this idea of this levirate marriage where I don't know of anyone even today who doesn't see the carrying on of names as important. It seems like something that is still very much part of our present reality, but in this code that they follow back into the Hebrew Scriptures, if a man dies, in order for his name to be carried on (especially if that man died without having produced an heir) a close relative would have to marry his widow and produce a male heir. Without that first child, that heir, the man would die

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and essentially not be remembered in any material way. They would say that his name was forgotten. And so the central problem behind the question that the Sadducees are asking has to deal with the fact that death has the power to erase a man's name, a man's family, and progenitive destiny. And according to this law, the only way that a man's name can live on is through marriage. So they asked this question seeming to force Jesus to say, you know one of these seven men will be the woman's husband in the afterlife. And so they're asking this exaggerated question that they know is hypothetical and probably is not likely to happen, which points us to realize that the Sadducees probably don't care whose wife she will be. They're trying to stump Jesus because they don't really care or believe in the idea of resurrection. So there are couple of things happening here in the background that I want us to note. This is the only time in the book of Luke that the Sadducees appear to be interacting with Jesus. For the most part, we kind of get these interactions with Jesus and the Pharisees to lean on. But there's a major difference between the way the Pharisees and the Sadducees believe and understand Scripture. The Sadducees for the most part embrace the Torah, the five books of the law, and they hold those five books as authoritative for them. But the Pharisees read the law and the prophets, and the writings, and there's something that's different about the law and the books of the prophets, and the writings. That fundamental difference has to do with the fact that you encounter scriptures dealing with apocalyptic texts in the prophets and the writings, whereas in the law, you wouldn't have as much. And so it would make sense that the Sadducees didn't believe in this idea of resurrection.

And so when I think about what types of writings we encounter and the stories we encounter in the prophets, I think about what we just heard this morning from the book of Haggai and the theology that comes out of the struggle and the hopelessness, the loss of the temple and exile and ruin. The theology of resurrection could only come out of a community that could see no other way. I also think that it's interesting that we have this story in the Book of Luke, but we also have it in Matthew and Mark, and in the Mark version there are a few differences. First we have in Mark 12:24 where it says that Jesus basically was testing their competence, or questioning their competence, rather. When he says, do they “know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?” And I love that Jesus is always quick with his comebacks, and in his comebacks it seems that he desires to know whether or not they are even asking the right question. And at the very end of the passage instead of saying what we have read in Luke where it says, “he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive”—instead we have this difference: “He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.” [laughter] I think I prefer Mark's version just because it's funnier.

And the third thing to remember and to know that is that resurrection is important to the Christian faith. I had written it down to read the Apostle's Creed, but I'm glad to know that it

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was part of service in the life of this church to read the Apostle's Creed. But it was so important for the early church to affirm the resurrection, in fact, would we be here if we didn't believe in the resurrection? That is a question for us to ask, but in the Apostle's Creed we have this phrase that, "On the third day He rose again from the dead." This separation is central to what makes us Christian and it has been for over 2000 years. So this question about resurrection leads me to wonder if Jesus is maybe indirectly telling us about one of the most important events of his life, and something that is essential to what we call the good news. Can it be good news without resurrection?

So, Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage." And so, as a single person, this brings a couple questions for me. Number one would be: Is this some kind of hidden affirmation for single people that there is no marriage in Heaven? [crowd chuckles] Maybe some single people may not find that as, like, you know, joyful as I do. [crowd laughs] [speaker chuckles] And it's not because I don't want to get married, but it's more connected to the reality that, my entire life, the church has elevated marriage as the pinnacle of what it looks like to be Christian in this world. Or it's like the highest form of holiness you can achieve on this earth, and something about there being no marriage in Heaven is kind of like a delayed justice. [laughs with crowd]

But what we get from this passage and our understanding here is that, you know, in reading this, Jesus is saying that marriage is not the most holy way of being if it doesn't exist in eternity, but it points to the lie that we have been fed all along. Married or single, what does it matter? When it comes time to resurrect we will all be singly devoted to worship of God. But we can't settle here, because that isn't the point that Jesus is trying to make when he's addressing the problem to the Sadducees—that the Sadducees have posed him. I'm sure he understands, you know, that the Sadducees are trying to trap him, but he turns, instead, not to answering the question that he is asked, but to point to a fundamental flaw in the Sadducees' understanding: the fundamental difference between this life and the next one, this life and that life.

The Sadducees meant to ask, "Whose wife will she be?" This is a question of possession, coming from a world of possession—a question about whose story will continue on. Only now that they have to realize and wrestle with this reality that, you know, do they themselves get to possess what is necessary to see the life to come? Will they have to release this idea and this focus on who this woman will be and wonder for themselves if they are worthy of being called Children of the resurrection?

There are a couple of words that are also used to translate *resurrection*: "awakening" and "rising." Awakening and rising. I would like for you to keep that in mind as we go forward. But I

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want to wrestle with some questions that I have from Mark's version of the text. Do they not know the scriptures? Or do they not know the power of God? And in reading this, I have rephrased these questions for myself: Have you forgotten the stories behind the name? And when you say that name, does it mean anything to you? Does it awaken anything in you? And when I ask these questions—Have you forgotten the stories behind the name? And when you say that name, does it mean anything to you?—I think of Moses, who came to know the name of God—the name that is bound up in this relational history and story of love through liberating action. Moses came to know that when that name was called upon, and the people who were freed came to know what that name was called upon, that it is a reminder of the relationship between Israel and God, freedom from Egypt. In the Exodus account, Moses asked God who he is and God responds with, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” I like how God is referring to himself through these relationships and identifying through these relationships.

So, in what ways do we need to encounter and remember who God is and what God can do? So, my other question—When you say that name, does it mean anything to you? Does it awaken anything in you?—I think of some other women in scripture who are in desperate situations, probably some that we can understand more than the one that the Sadducees bring to Jesus. I think of Hagar, the Edgyptian slave woman, who learned the name of God as “the one who sees her,” and who was awakened to new hope as she has to return to living with Abraham and Sarah and raising her son, Ishmael, as their son. I think of the Samaritan woman in the book of John, the woman that Jesus meets at the well who was all alone. A woman who is known for having several husbands, and probably has to make ends meet, and she learns of Jesus as the living water and is awakened to this new hope and begins to evangelize and tell of the story of her encounter with him.

So, for as essential as it seems that this idea of resurrection is to the foundation of the gospel, I have to admit that it's a rather confusing concept, and it's rather strange for us to be talking about it at this point of the year when we haven't even began the Advent season and talking about the birth of Jesus. But I would like to reread again that verse from 2 Thessalonians that we read earlier. 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, verses 13–17 says: “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our being gathered together to him, we beg you brothers and sisters not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that this day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exults himself above every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes the see in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by God, because God chose you as the first

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fruits of salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit, and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast in traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. Now, may our Lord Jesus Christ, himself, and God, our father, who loved us through grace, give us eternal comfort and good hope. Comfort our hearts and strengthen them for every good work in the word.”

When I read this text, I can only think that it was written for a community that was waiting to be gathered up. This community believed that Jesus would return any day, and was focused on preparing the way and preparing their hearts and minds and bodies for being raised. They did not think that they would taste death. And the end was very near. Until it wasn't.

There are some other passages where you can see this is the outlook in the community of 1 Corinthians, for example. There are people asking Paul if they should even bother getting remarried, and Paul addresses them by saying that those who are married should stay married and those who are not should stay unmarried, because if we're going to be resurrected any day now, it's probably best to just sit tight for a little bit. [crowd chuckles] So, the belief in resurrection was central and was very much a Jewish idea before it was adopted by Christians. But it also meant that if we're waiting for a resurrection to happen any day, then we can put up with ridicule and suffering, and we can crawl towards hope, whatever it takes. But what does that mean for us 2019 years later? [chuckles] That is a question I ask myself and that I'm asking you.

What does it mean for us on this side of the resurrection, where Christianity in the world right now is so much more than just about Jesus, or so much more than the small community it started from? On this side of resurrection, we have all of our historical baggage to look back on. On the side of the resurrection we have so many saints to remember that it might just take 2,000 years to name all of them. And on this side of the resurrection, I wonder if we, the church, are still putting up with ridicule, suffering, and crawling towards hope. And are we still just as eager to be awakened?

Resurrection is good news, but it doesn't get any clearer when you believe in it. Just like imagining what the life to come looks like, imagining trying to conceptualize it, we fall short, because we can only construct what we know with our heavenly minds. How can we know what the eternal looks like? Just as the Sadducees imagined that marriage, this earthly concept, would be something that would exist in the life to come. They imagined that this woman who was suffering on Earth might be brought into eternity with the same suffering, the same

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conundrum, because it doesn't fit their imagination to imagine that she could be liberated from a world where she would have to marry to be safe and be entered into a world where she no longer has those same problems, because she is covered by the love of God.

I'm reminded of the ofrenda and the materials that were left on the table to the dead, those mementos that serve to tether those who have died to those who are living. I'm reminded of the vigil that we had on that Wednesday for those who were lost, those lives that were cut short. I'm reminded that our present world, in these communities that we form, that there are spaces where there are many who are carrying the desire to be liberated in one way or another. So, I ask again, when we confess this belief in Jesus, this resurrected God, what does it awaken in you?

I'll tell you what it awakens for me: a desire to encounter Yahweh like Moses at the burning bush, and to ask God for a name—something that would awaken me—a desire for God to respond with some names and some stories that I know—for God to say, “I am the God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, whose children will be free and unsubjectable. I am the God of Moses and black Moses, also known as Harriet Tubman, who led so many out of slavery. I am the God of Ida B. Wells the relentless champion for justice against mob rule and the lynching of black men.” And from there I want to be able to remember who God is, and what God can do, and what God has done. This name is a reminder of a love that can not stay dead. The name is a place to put my confidence in the hope of resurrection. The name is the recitation of the only marriage that will exist in the world to come, and this name has the power to put fear and death to rest. I repeat that this name has the power to put fear and to rest, so that true life can begin on this side of the resurrection as well as the other.

To be called children of the resurrection for us should tell the story of God and God's relationship with humankind and the liberating work of salvation. In Psalm 27 it says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. For whom shall I be afraid?” So, I ask you again, can it be good news without the resurrection? I know that Jesus is alive because he risked it all, knowing that state violence would be used against him, that his friends would betray him, that death was a certainty. It's good news because of what Jesus accomplished and what we can model and how we shape our lives, not as those who are waiting to be awakened, but those who already are—those who realize that freedom can be lived into when this world meets the next one in the kingdom of God.

So, death is not meant to be the final chapter of our stories. Our lives were never intended to be blotted out; our names were never intended to be blotted out. And yes, on this side of the resurrection, it's looking kind of bleak (winter is coming), but also a lot of people have been

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lost, and a lot of people have a lot to lose. But it's very clear that this world needs God. But I often think about how we're often waiting for God and waiting for God, but if, and if it's 2019 years after the resurrection, I can only imagine that the only reason why we're still here is that the world needs us, too. So, can we be the children of God who are found in the freedom that awakens, knowing that Jesus defeated death. And if you are looking for a win, I'd take that one.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you so much, Rose. Boy, I'm glad we brought Rose in today. What a wonderful message, and such a beautiful set up for the sacrament of Holy Communion, which is our opportunity to exist at this kind of place where death and resurrection are hinging on one another, remembering Christ's sacrifice, but not just his sacrifice of death, also his resurrection and the power that comes with it for us.

Artisan's communion table is an open table; any in the room who are eager to find Jesus today are invited to come and partake of this holy sacrament and trust that you will find him here. As I often say, it is the table not of the church, but of the Lord. And it's been made ready for those who want to seek him and find him here. So, you can come as we sing these next songs, take a piece of the bread and remember Christ's body, which is broken for you, and you can dip it in one of the cups—we have both wine and juice; make the wisest choice for yourself—and remember his blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. May it be an act of trust, may it be the real presence of Christ the Savior, and especially given today's message, may it be a connection between you and those who celebrate the sacrament around the world—and yes, throughout time—a connective, unitive, communion with those who have gone before us. So, our table is open; let's continue to worship God in song, sacrament, and prayer. Come if you will.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.