

“Children of the resurrection” a sermon based on Luke 20:27 -38 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 10 November 2019 by Kerry Enright.

Note – this sermon draws significantly on an article by Debie Thomas in a weekly blog [Journeying with Jesus](#).

Early on Easter Day, one of the senior ministers of the Church would phone about 20 colleagues, and simply say – Christ is risen. The one phoned would respond – He is risen indeed. And then they would hang up.

In the early years of ministry, this was a wonderful ritual that began Easter Day for me. I waited for the call. He phoned. I responded. We hung up. And it continued for many years until he became unwell.

He believed that the mission of the church and the ministry we exercise rested on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, that the breaking out of Christ from death provided the impetus for what we do and named the power in which mission is exercised.

So when he died, I imagined this might be a feature of his funeral.

And yet, we went through the service without one reference to resurrection. I thought that even if the word was not used, there might be some allusion to the concept, but no. The omission was so obvious, several of us asked why. We learned that the local minister was struggling with his belief in resurrection. He had got to the point that he could not believe in something so obviously inconsistent with what he knew – that we die and dissolve. So he had simply stopped using the word or alluding to the concept.

In seeking to be true to himself, the minister avoided what was core to the belief of the person who died and to the church itself.

Over the last five years here, there has probably been no subject about which people have questioned me more than this one. And, let me say, in case there is doubt by the end of this sermon, that I am part of the church catholic that affirms, in the words of the Apostles’ Creed: I believe in the resurrection of the body.

And ... I am with the minister in exploring what that means. We only need to read Paul’s reflection in 1 Corinthians 15 to realise that there is here, layer upon layer of meaning. I have noticed, too, that as there are people who want to reduce the Christian faith to one dimension, science seems to be moving in the opposite direction, opening out the possibility of many dimensions of life.

So, in a way, we are very much at home in this exchange between the Sadducees and Jesus.

Debie Thomas helps us explore it.

The Sadducees approach Jesus with a trick question. Hoping to pit him against his own religious tradition, they tell him a hypothetical story. A woman is given in marriage to one of seven brothers. When her husband dies without fathering an heir, she is passed on — as the law of Moses dictates — to his next younger brother. When that brother also dies without having a child, she's passed on to the third. And so on. Eventually all seven brothers die, and the woman — still childless — dies, too. "In the resurrection," the Sadducees ask smugly, "whose wife will she be?"

The story is meant to be a joke that exposes the absurdity of believing in life after death. How could resurrection ever work in practical terms, given the complexities of human life? What would happen to marriage? To lineages and family traditions? To Old Testament law? To sex?

Jesus — as usual — refuses to take the bait. He tells the Sadducees that the entire premise of their question is wrong. Their conception of God is too small. The children of the resurrection, he tells them, will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They will be like angels — for whom the rules and practices of earthly life will not apply. To grasp resurrection in earthly terms is impossible; it is a reality of another order entirely, an order we can only approach by faith.

So we are not the first generation to wonder about resurrection. The ancients struggled with it just as much as we do. The Sadducees in the gospel point out discrepancies between resurrection and the laws of marriage and kinship. Now, in a similar way, we point out discrepancies between resurrection and the laws of biology and physics. Easter morning can baffle us. We don't know how to make sense of an empty grave, a reanimated body, a hope beyond the grim finality of death.

Jesus sympathises. His response to the Sadducees is not an angry one. He doesn't scold; he challenges. He invites them to stretch themselves. To see anew, to see again. He invites them to think beyond entrenched categories of what's possible and impossible.

Notice also who is doing the challenging. People with influence are using people who are powerless to score points. Not for the first time. Remember a mob of self-righteous men dragging a terrified woman "caught in adultery" to Jesus, and daring him to let her off the hook in violation of Old Testament law.

Remember elite dinner guests berating a broken-hearted woman who anoints Jesus's feet with her tears. Remember the Pharisees criticising Jesus for eating with tax collectors and "sinners." So here, the Sadducees concoct a story about a vulnerable widow who is passed from one man to another like a chattel, just to trip up Jesus. In each of these examples, the person in pain is expendable. In each example, human suffering is abstracted for the sake of debate and theological finality.

No wonder people on the margins turn to Jesus while people with influence find him intolerable. Resurrection means living in circumstances that should render living impossible. Resurrection means enduring, overcoming, persisting, and surviving. Maybe resurrection only makes sense to those who desperately need it. Maybe the hope of justice, peace, rest, and consolation after death only resonates for those whose lives on earth are marred by injustice, anxiety, toil, and trauma.

The children of resurrection know that questions about Jesus are not finally academic questions. They are questions of life and death. They are questions with high stakes. Imagine what resurrection would feel like for the woman trapped in the Sadducees' story. Imagine her arriving, finally, to a people and a place where her worth and her beloved-ness don't depend on her husband, or her fertility, or her sex appeal. Imagine her basking in the safe, unconditional, and eternal love of the God who created her.

If our questions and objections about faith require us to invalidate the lived experiences of actual people who are suffering in this life, then we are asking the wrong questions and favouring the wrong objections. The children of resurrection are supremely children of love.

The other problem with approaching Jesus as the Sadducees do is that their approach is abstract, not personal. They want to *know* Jesus without walking *with* Jesus. They want to witness resurrection without suffering death. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes clear that only those willing to take up their own crosses and follow him can experience new life. Only disciples will become children of the resurrection. The life of faith is not a spectator sport — to know it, we walk it. We share in his life as it is embodied in Christian community. We take up the practices of God's people. Resurrection knowing is a *lived* knowing.

In his response to the Sadducees, Jesus describes a realm in which people neither marry nor are given in marriage. A realm where no human being "belongs" to any other, because all belong equally to God. This is a realm where women are no longer treated like property. A realm where sex,

sexuality, power, status, gender, marriage, kinship, and childbearing no longer bind or restrict God's children. Women will not continue to be owned. Women will not continue to be passive. The assumptions of the Sadducees when it comes to resurrection exposes their doubt and disbelief in its possibility, but also their inability to imagine that God might have something different in mind when it comes to eternal life -- and when it comes to what the Kingdom of God should look like amongst us - a realm where patriarchy is obsolete, defunct, and dead. "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."

We can move from the questions about what resurrection looks like to the fact that resurrection is promised, and it means a very different world.

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