

Comprehending the Resurrection

by Christy Wetzig

Luke 20:27-38

There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife."

And Jesus said to them, "The children of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

Remember way back, maybe in June, when I first read to you, "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem"? That was in Luke 9, and now we're in chapter 20, so for more than half the book of Luke, Jesus has been on this journey to Jerusalem, and I'm sure you're so tired of hearing me talk about it. But you'll have to hear about it a little bit longer, because the drama of this book, the narrative arc, has leading up to what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem, and then the lectionary sort of shuffles the cards and we completely skip Jesus' great entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to shouts of "Hosanna" (because we've already read it this year on Palm Sunday).

But I feel we need to have a moment to complete the drama of the book, to recognize Jesus' arrival, finally, even though humbly, in Jerusalem. Once inside the gates, he heads straight to the temple, and he sets up housekeeping. First he drives out the capitalists, and then he begins teaching there, which is where we find him today. It's part of a contentious chapter, where Jesus and the religious leaders argue and challenge one another, like roosters circling each other before a fight, flaring their necks, all glaring eyes and stomping feet. The status quo religious are not about to cede the devotion of the people to this interloper, and Jesus, well, it's almost like he wants to give them a reason to kill him. He's arrived in Jerusalem, and although he isn't interested in invasion or violence, he definitely hasn't adopted a charm offensive. No pandering here, no pressing the flesh, no kissing babies. His sleeves are rolled up, and his fists are out.

The lectionary drops us in on one segment of the debate, when the Sadducees get their turn. They bring him a problem supposed to disprove the idea of the resurrection, which is a doctrine, the text explains, they don't believe in, since resurrection goes unmentioned in the Torah, which is the only part of the Scriptures the Sadducees claim. A Sunday school teacher of mine used to say that they didn't believe in the resurrection, "which was very sad, you see." The argument they bring him feels pretty arcane to us, dealing with a dusty corner of Jewish law, a provision meant to assure men a continuity of their family line and to provide for widows, but using that, they have engineered a bizarre situation that seems to disprove the possibility of a life beyond death: if God allows a woman to marry more than one man, how will God decide whose wife she'll be in the afterlife? "Gotcha," they think.

Jesus strokes his beard. He first tells them their assumptions are wrong, that there is little continuity between this life and the one afterward, so we can't apply the rules of this life to resurrection life. The founding principles of this life assume death and scarcity—the most important moral and legal relationships that govern our society—parent to

child, spouse to spouse, body to death, time itself—would therefore no longer apply, since in the resurrection, we are reborn as children of the resurrection, not of our parents. How can we fathom a life so different from the one we know?

Betraying the smallness of our imaginations, we instead esteem resuscitation, which is just short term revitalization, saving death for a future day. We imagine revivification, where to our horror corpses regain life and walk about. Or we work for and long for revival—restoration of the downtrodden, to achieve dignity and the middle class. These, with our short-term vision, our servitude to the laws that govern this age, are all we can imagine. That and boredom, which you have to admit seems to be implied by an eternal, nightless changeless life.

Jesus says, you people have no idea what the resurrection is like. Sadly, he doesn't elaborate much. He is privy to the mysteries that tantalize us, and there in the temple, having finally arrived in Jerusalem, resurrection could not have been more important to him than in that moment. His days, he knew, were numbered.

But he goes on to disprove the Sadducees' theory, using their own text and methods. The Torah says that God *is* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all of these ancients long since dead, and since the dead can have no God, they must not in fact be dead. Jesus wins the argument. One of his opponents even says, "Teacher, you have spoken well." He argues so well that the conflict dies out—no one dares bring him any more questions.

If I may timidly raise my hand here, I would like to posit that perhaps Jesus did make a mistake here. His mistake was to try to convince people through logic.

In our homeschool program, we had a heavy emphasis on logic and debate. All the kids learned logical fallacies, the structure of logical arguments, they participated in debates on topics like the death penalty, the military draft, immigration, debates with rules and proper form. I listened to a lot of these debates, and the kids did a good job, they

followed the rules, or not, and won, or not, based on who presented their arguments the best. But I don't think there was anybody in the room who was convinced by their logic, well-formed as it was.

Logic governs our heads, but I wonder how many people allow that part of their physiognomy to govern their lives. I think most of us follow our hearts, or, strangely, our guts, that logicless center of our body that somehow signals without the benefit of brain cells, what is, to our core, right and wrong.

So even though the people had to grant that Jesus had won the argument, he had not won their hearts or their guts. They shrugged their shoulders, grunted their reluctant concessions, but they were not about to drop everything to follow him. These were the same people who would conspire to kill him.

We love to hate these guys, the religious leaders, but at least they were ready to go toe to toe with Jesus. They made it plain how they felt about him; they had their arguments out and fists were going to fly.

In our day, we're more sophisticated than that. Sitting in the pews, we know with our minds that Jesus won the day, that the scribes were on the wrong side of history. We would never dare to raise a fist to Jesus, the lamb of God, the second person in the Trinity, who lives and reigns with God forevermore amen.

But as always, I find myself empathizing with the religious leaders. Don't I have some beef with Jesus too, some arguments I could bring against him?

Maybe it's that I feel we don't need God anymore in our advanced society. We don't need God to explain the origin of the universe—we have science. We don't need prayer—we have medicine. We don't need religion to teach us how to act—we have therapy.

Or maybe it's this complicated book that claims to teach us about God but seems to weave a tangle of contradictions with verities and indictments. Just who wrote that book anyway? It's an ancient book that seems irrelevant to today, impossible to untangle.

Or what about the hypocrisy of Christians of the past? Who unlike the saints we celebrated last week left a legacy of complicity or cowardice or intolerance? Their testimony makes a lie of their faith, and how can we possibly buy into what they were not willing to stake with their actions?

What of my prayers that have gone unanswered?

What of the injustice of the world, where the innocent suffer and the cruel go unpunished, where despite the promises of God evil still seems to breed rampant?

I think it's time we went to the temple to stand toe to toe with Jesus, to bring him all of our arguments, to not sit placidly in the pew but shout out our grief to him, bring him all the hardest stuff, pound with our fists on his broad chest, finally face the holes in our faith that we are afraid to peer into. I think Jesus is not afraid to hear any of it.

But how will he answer?

People have tried to answer these questions for him. They've filled bookstores with their replies, reams of logic and argument. Satisfying our minds perhaps but not reaching into our guts.

How does Jesus reply?

As Jesus circles his opponents in the temple, his entire being is bent toward what will happen in the next few days: his final instructions for his disciples, their abandonment of him, his humiliation and lonely, agonizing death, the three quiet days in darkness and then...glory. Resurrection.

This is Jesus' reply to our sorrows and anger and disbelief: the beautiful, illogical logic of the cross—a reply that bypasses our minds and reaches straight into our guts, our hearts, where we can recognize truth. Jesus' reply is not in words but with his very life, poured out for us, poured out with love that compelled him to suffer without anger or desire for retribution, a love that made physical God's forgiveness of every offense, a love that draws us in, calls us to God despite the digging in of our heels, a love that like resurrection is not bounded by death or

scarcity.

So all these words and what it comes down to is that simple picture on the wall—the cross. I love how at the front of the sanctuary we have these other crosses in our windows—superimposed on nature, on the world outside the church. The cross is the negative space between everything you see. When you look out the window (and do it for a moment: pick a spot, a twig, a remaining leaf, and focus on it for a few seconds) and now look back inside at the white walls. You see not the thing you've been looking at, but you see the cross. And that's the answer to all our wonderings, all our anger, our doubt, our debates: the love of God, made concrete in Jesus' death, is behind and around and between and beneath it all, although it is unseen, unremarked, unnoticed, unfathomed. Doesn't that mean that your life, too, is sketched with the cross of Jesus? Even though you don't see it always? The empty, resurrection cross of Jesus, God's love made physical, it remains God's reply.

Do we keep circling? Or do we concede? Do we keep fighting the pull of God's love? Or do we turn, keep turning throughout our lives, to trust it, even though with our brains we don't understand it. The Resurrection, which awaited Jesus on the other side of the cross, awaits us too, even though we can't comprehend that either. What do we do in the meantime?