

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Like Angels

Sermon Reflection Notes

What's our view of heaven? Pastor Ron started the sermon with the unspoken question that pop culture attempts to answer in so many flawed visions; there's the Righteous Brothers' quip about if a Rock and Roll Heaven exists, you know they've got a hell of a band. There's the idea of heaven being the 'perfect' place for each of us individually (a mall, a golf course, a fluffy cloud surrounded by harp music), and there is even the idea from the TV show *The Good Place* that suggests heaven is access to unlimited frozen yogurt. Or not...since it turned out the characters were in "the bad place" after all. We all have seen and heard the attempts to explain what heaven is like. We probably have some opinions of our own.

But heaven is difficult to talk about, particularly for preachers, for a couple of reasons. First, a lot of the conversation about heaven and hell stems from anxiety about where we and our loved ones will end up. We want to go 'upstairs' and not 'downstairs' (and who came up with those directions anyway?), and so we worry about 'how to get to heaven.' The other reason is that even if someone describes a heaven we don't really agree with, it's hard to say to someone who is grieving, "Well, that's not actually biblically accurate. You've got the idea of heaven all wrong." It's also worth pointing out, we just don't know what heaven will be like. We haven't been there yet. We are guessing, using the information we have, and filling in the gaps with imagination.

This week's scripture is less about what heaven is actually like though, and more about a group of powerful leaders trying to befuddle Jesus and prove him wrong because he challenged the status quo. The Sadducees were the aristocrats of the time; they trafficked in power and believed, firmly, that this is the only world there is or will be. The idea of resurrection of the dead was ridiculous to them. The books of the Bible they recognized (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were the authoritative last word, and Jesus was not following the laws of Moses, the Torah, the way things have always been and always should be. So, they ask a question about marriage and what will happen to a woman who has married seven brothers because the brothers kept dying, an idea laid out by the patriarchal society and Jewish law. The Sadducees don't really care who the woman is married to in heaven, mainly because they don't believe in resurrection in the first place. But they do care that Jesus is challenging their power and the ways things have always been. Jesus doesn't answer the question they ask—in fact, he upends it. He tells them they have it all wrong and are asking the wrong questions. That they are thinking about marriage, and resurrection, and, *gasp*, scripture all wrong.

Jesus' words affirm the historic Christian teaching that there is resurrection of the dead. Not a belief in the immortality of the soul—where the body rots and the soul goes on. Jesus died and was resurrected from the dead. We really die and really have the hope of resurrection. But Jesus teaches us in this scripture that the resurrected life is not merely a continuation of life as we know it in perpetuity. Jesus says: "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, because they are like angels and are children of God." Jesus also challenges the understanding of scripture by pointing out that the story of the burning bush in Exodus declares that **God is** the God of Abraham and Isaac. **Is**. Meaning that, in some way, they must still be alive...evidence of resurrection.

In other words, things are different after resurrection. People and relationships function in different ways. Heaven isn't about us, is it? It's not about creating a perfect place for us to always be happy and entertained. Heaven is all about God. It's about never tiring of gazing at the One who is perfect love.

The scripture began with a question about marriage. Jesus challenges the purpose of marriage in his response also: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage" Pastor Ron pointed out that marriage gives us something to cherish while it lasts. It is in the liturgy: *to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.* Marriage is not eternal, it is temporal—bound by the time in which we exist together. We love and we cherish while we can. And marriage is no longer the necessity it once was. Being single, divorced, married again, whatever the current status of the relationships we hold is less important than the training ground provided by relationships with each other. We choose to be fully present with each other in this moment, drawing closer to God, eating with one another, worshipping, being friends. Marriage is not easy. Relationships are not easy. They aren't heaven and they aren't forever. But they teach us something about resurrection and being with God. For the promise of resurrection is the promise of finding delight in the presence of God—cherishing each moment, living in the present tense with God in love, finding awe in who God is and what God is doing. Like angels, we will cherish each moment and be forever "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Scripture

Luke 20:27-38 (NRSVUE)

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."

Discussion Questions

1. What was this sermon about?
2. The word heaven is used more than 550 times in the Bible. The words 'heavens' and 'heavenly' are used about 100 more times. The word hell is used 52 times throughout the Bible. What does knowing this suggest to you? Why?

3. In the Apostle's Creed, we affirm that we believe in the resurrection of the body. Last week we celebrated communion on All Saint's Sunday and affirmed that those who have gone before us are with us still, the communion of saints. John Wesley said that "the same power which raised Christ must also be able to quicken out mortal bodies...;" in other words, our bodies, our selves---who we are in our entirety---will someday live again with God. What do you think about all this? What gives you pause? What do you immediately affirm? Discuss.
4. Part of our struggle when talking about eternal life is that we can't imagine stepping outside the confines of time. But God is beyond time. God created time. What is our understanding of time and how it functions? How do we imagine things 'beyond time'?
5. For John Wesley, heaven is more than where God is enthroned, Jesus abides, or where the children of God will spend eternity. Heaven is also a kingdom for here and now. For both John and Charles Wesley, heaven is love---as evidenced in the lyrics from *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*: "Anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven." Our goal is really love, and it finds heaven for us.
How or why does 'love find heaven for us'?
6. "[The Sadducees sensed, as we do,] that resurrection is dangerous business. It is not just about the dead person being resuscitated. It is about God's power for life that moves into all our arrangements, shatters all our categories by which we manage, control, and administer. It speaks about God's will for new life working where we thought our tired deathliness would prevail." (*The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, 360) Why is God's gift of new life threatening?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we live in the midst of mystery, and yet we want to know. We want to know what lies beyond death; we want to know about the people we love who have gone before us. We want to know that in death we will be safe with you. And so, we pay attention to signs that comfort us, coincidences that can't be just coincidences. We share our stories with trustworthy people, and somehow, we find our way toward faith and hope.

Spark our imagination as we move toward the table of holy communion, so we may see that we are moving closer to you and to each other. As we eat the bread and drink from the cup, help us to see the ways you nourish us, the way you join our hands in friendship, the way you lift our eyes toward you. Give us the courage to trust you for all of our future, both here on earth and beyond what we can know. Give us faith to love you and to love each other. We pray in the name of Jesus, who was the first to be raised to new life and who lives with you both now and forever. Amen.

"God was, and is, and forever will be."