

Do You Believe?

November 10, 2013

Luke 20:27-38

During one of my college years, we had a head cheerleader who would pace back and forth along a platform with a microphone constantly trying to keep the student section fired up and noisy. When things weren't going so well, and the team needed a rally, he would often shout out, "Do you believe?" as a way of getting folks not to give up but to continue supporting the team.

I thought about him - Hannas Latham was his name - as I was studying today's gospel lesson, because it has a lot to do with belief - a belief in something most would say is a key element of Christian theology.

In an attempt to disprove or discredit God the Creator, the atheist may ask the Christian, Can God create a rock so big that he can't lift it? Now we're trapped... If you answer, "No, God can't create a rock so big that he can't lift it." Then you've upheld God's great power, but have discredited God's creative ability. But if you answer, "Yes, God CAN create a rock so big that he can't lift it." Then you have upheld God's creative ability and discredited his omnipotent power.

So what's a Christian to do? How do we answer, "Can God create a rock so big that he can't lift it?" Well, the simplest answer is, "Why would he want to?"

Okay, so that doesn't really address the actual question at hand. But this question from an atheist to a Christian - trying to trap the Christian into disproving one aspect of the God in which he believes is similar to the Sadducees' question to Jesus in today's scripture: If, according to God's law, a woman is married by seven consecutive brothers – none of whom produce children. When they all die and are resurrected, "Who's wife will she be?"

This question was intended to trip up Jesus. It's not a question about faithfulness in marriage, but rather a question intended to disprove the existence of the resurrection or at least prove that the resurrection and the Laws of Moses were at odds with each other.

The Sadducees, who were the ones asking the question, did not believe in a resurrection. Their faith and religious practices were based solely on the Torah – the Law of Moses (roughly the first five books of the Old Testament in our Bible). Imagine if all the knowledge you had about God and God's desires for you came from those books – your knowledge and understanding would be quite limited and I'm sure your faith and practices would be quite different.

Nowhere in these books which make up the Sadducees "bible" is resurrection mentioned, therefore they didn't believe in it. Instead, the emphasis in these books is on God's blessing of future generations. So the Sadducees were concerned with procreation and lots of it. The way their faith was embodied was in having children and passing the faith on to children. And so, the question of the woman married seven times to seven brothers but still died childless would have been a great issue for the Sadducees on a couple of levels.

First was the idea of dying childless. But more important in the effort to entrap Jesus was the issue of polyandry (one wife having multiple husbands at one time) – which is forbade by the scriptures - and the issue of a wife as a possession or a commodity. So, in essence the Sadducees were asking Jesus – When they all die, will she be one wife with seven husbands or which husbands will be cheated out of their possession (a.k.a. their wife)?

If Jesus answered that she would be one wife with seven husbands, or if he singled out one husband above the others, he would be accused of breaking Levirate law. So what's he to do?

Well, just as the atheist's question isn't really about the rock, but about disproving God's existence. The Sadducees' question isn't really about marriage, but about discrediting the resurrection.

So Jesus focused on the resurrection and offered two responses: first he says, life in the resurrected state is not like our life on earth. And secondly he says, God is the God of the living and not the dead. So, let's look at these two ideas and what they teach us today.

Jesus says, Life in God's eternal kingdom is not going to be bound by the ideas and ideals of this world. Think of all the jokes you've heard over the years about people going to heaven. In each of these, we poke fun at and challenge our concept of heaven and the fact that we try to create the unknown in the image of the known.

When you close your eyes and picture heaven, what do you see? Angels winging about with halos, bouncing from cloud to cloud? A long line of people standing outside a great golden fence? A group of your family and friends standing there waiting to greet you? Do you see streets paved with gold and buildings on either side? Do you see just a great light? We all have different images, I'm sure! And the truth is we may all be right and we may all be wrong – we just don't know!

But what we do know from today's scripture is that in the resurrection we will not be the same and our relationships will not be the same. At the time of resurrection, all will become whole. We and all our relationships will become perfected. As Paul writes to the early believers in Corinth, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears... Now we see but a poor reflection in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 12)

And in this perfection, only available through the resurrection grace of God, we will not need strength and foundation that relationships such as healthy marriages and friendships provide. In the resurrection there will be no need for procreation, because all will live eternally. In the resurrection, our only care will be our desire to praise God – possessions and wealth will hold no sway in our eternal living.

So, what Jesus is teaching us is that when we arrive in God's eternal kingdom, our focus will be solely upon God and not upon ourselves, our needs, our wants, our desires. And that's hard for us to imagine.

The Sadducees, like many people today, thought of heaven (and the resurrection) as a continuation of life on earth. I'm reminded of all the books about heaven that seem to permeate the bookstore and library shelves! Rich Albom's *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, Don Piper's *90 Minutes In Heaven* and Erwin Lutzer's *One Minute After You Die* are all bestselling books that seek to describe a version of heaven.

And you can walk into your local Christian bookstore and purchase one of these. What makes these books a bestseller? It's the fact that we people in general (and even we Christians) want to know right now what resurrection will be like. And we don't like Jesus' teaching of "wait and see!"

But in truth – I am certain that these books hint at heaven, but they will never capture the fullness of heaven. Because heaven is not going to be about who we will meet there or what it looks like – the resurrection is going to be about the fullness of our relationship with our Creator. There are no words or concepts that we can use that will fully make us understand it.

Right now, while we are bound by our temporal life – we can't imagine the never ending day! Right now, while problems and issues abound in our lives – we can't conceive of being focused solely on praising God and not thinking about our own condition. Right now, we are limited by our finite mind and finite concepts – we can't envision infinity.

So, in answer the Sadducees' question, "Whose wife will she be?" Jesus says "It doesn't really matter because heaven isn't like earth!"

But Jesus knew that this answer would not fully satisfy the Sadducees. (Just like us saying to the atheist "Why would God want to create a rock he couldn't lift? It just doesn't matter!") So, Jesus went on in his reply to teach the Sadducees about the concept of resurrection – using an image from the life of Moses.

Jesus reminds the Sadducees about Moses and his calling at the burning bush when God spoke to him and declared himself to be "The God of Moses' father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" and the God of Moses himself. And thus Jesus says, "God is a living God of living people."

God did not cease to be once creation was completed and the Hebrews were brought out of Egypt and into the Promised Land ! No! God continued to be at work in the lives of his people through the time of Jesus and continues today to be alive and at work in your lives!

God is not the god of the dead. Our God, the great "I Am" is not Hades or Pluto or Anubis – the mythological gods of the dead who rule over places of torture and torment.

No, our God is the God of the living. And when we cease living on this earth, in this mortal realm, we move into another state of living. In God's eyes, we pass from life into life – and therefore God can continue to claim to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – for to God they are not dead but are alive!

Again, this whole concept of resurrection is difficult for us to believe because we don't understand how it works. And it goes against what we witness in our daily lives. We know that people die – family members, friends – and as far as this earth is concerned, they are gone. They are physically with us no more.

And I believe, and our faith teaches, that for people without faith in the resurrection of Christ then death is death - it is the end. But for us – people of faith in Christ - death is another beginning. And for God, our death is a continuation of our life. That's why Christians are often referred to as people of the resurrection faith.

Yet, there are many Christians today that don't believe in the Resurrection. Last year, the youth at a church I'm familiar with did a play called "The Case of the Empty Tomb." This play looked at theories that people to this day use to try to discredit Christ's death and resurrection.

He didn't really die. There was a secret path in the tomb that led him out. There was an air shaft that kept him alive. The disciples stole his body right out from under the Roman guards' noses! These theories didn't hold water in the 1st century and they don't hold water now!

The truth of our faith is Christ died for us, Christ was resurrected for us, Christ reigns in power for us and Christ intercedes for us. How? That's what some people ask. They seem to want irrefutable proof.

Well, I can't give you a scientific explanation. I can't sit down with you like an accountant does and say here's what the numbers show. I can't reduce it to formulas and theorems and proofs. But through faith in the power of the Living God revealed in and through our Scriptures I know it's true.

Our quest in life is not to figure out how the resurrection works or what life will be like in the resurrected state, but to look with anticipation to that day when we will be in the eternal presence of our God.

I remember an article in TIME magazine about 31-year old Genelle Guzman. Genelle was the last of just four people caught in the debris of the Twin Towers on 9/11 to be found alive.

After the planes hit the World Trade Center, Genelle was descending a stair case from the 64th floor of the North Tower. Steel beams weakened to their breaking point. Solid concrete was pulverized. But somehow her body found an air pocket.

Her right leg was pinned under heavy concrete pillars. Her head was caught between stacks of wreckage. But somehow she was still alive. For twenty-seven hours Guzman lay trapped and seriously injured.

Several months before the attacks Genelle had started attending a church in Brooklyn. She wanted to get her life turned around. So while she was stuck in the rubble, she started to pray. She'd trail off into sleep – wake up and pray some more.

Shortly after noon on Wednesday the 12th, she heard voices. So she screamed as loud as she could, "I'm here! HEY, I'M RIGHT HERE!" A rescue worker responded, "Do you see the light?" She did not. She took a piece of concrete and banged it against a broken stairway overhead—probably the same structure that had saved her life.

The searchers find the noise. Genelle wedged her hand through a crack in the wall, and felt someone grab it. She heard a voice say, "I've got you," and Genelle Guzman said, "OH GOD, THANK YOU." It took 20 long minutes, and then she was saved.

In many ways, Genelle Guzman represents the plight of all people. We are buried under an enormous mess of spiritual black marks – ways we have wronged our perfect God. The Bible calls these things sin. We have no hope of freeing ourselves. We are truly stuck. In need of rescue.

But by admitting the need to be forgiven – by reaching out and saying, "God, help me! I can't get out of this unless you save me," we can be confident that he hears and helps.

That's what we remember today at The Lord's Supper--that God reached down into the rubble and saved us by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We don't know if Jesus' words changed the minds of any of the Sadducees or others that were questioning him that day. But we do know that within a week from this exchange, the Sadducees had the opportunity to witness the crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. Maybe that changed their minds...

We, however, only have our faith. Faith that Christ's teachings are true. Faith that Christ's promises are certain. Faith that God is the God of the living. Faith that when our life on this earth ends – a new reality, a new life will open for us. Faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Be strong in your faith and know that your Redeemer lives and you live in him – now and forevermore. Do you believe?