



Risky Liberalism

Mark 12:18-27

Sunday, November 3, 2024

Aledo United Methodist Church

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Gospel Lesson, Mark 12:18-27

¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹ “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children.

²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection^[c] whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

²⁴ Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?

²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’^[d]? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

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Sermon “Risky Liberalism” by Pastor Dave

Saturday night, August 30, 1997. My son Jonathan and I were at the Verona UMC; we were preparing for worship the following morning. I had things I needed to do, and Jonathan was mowing the church lawn. As he finished, I went out to the car and turned on the radio to hear reports that Princess Diana had been in a serious car accident in Paris. And as we all know, it was shortly thereafter that she was pronounced dead.

The death of Princess Diana is one of those events where you know exactly where you were when you heard the news; I can still see the dashboard of my car.

After her death, “Books of Remembrance” were placed in public buildings throughout Britain and beyond, so that people could sign their names and express their grief over her passing. In doing so, they expressed a wide range of beliefs about what happens after death. Several people wrote that Diana had become a star in the sky. Some wrote that God wanted her company, so he took her sooner than we had expected. Many people wrote that she was an angel in disguise, and now she had gone back to being a regular angel once again. Others wrote that she was clearly angelic material, so now she had graduated to being a proper angel.

There’s no basis for any of those ideas in the Bible, so one must assume it’s the sort of thing that occurs to people naturally, in a kind of folk-religion, as they try to come to terms with the sense of loss that millions felt when Diana died.

Jesus’ conversation with the Sadducees in Mark 12 is as close as you get to the suggestion that humans become angels after they die. But Mark 12 doesn’t actually mean that. What we do have is a complex and difficult question, and we have to take it step by step if we’re to see both what was at stake for Jesus and his opponents and what we can learn for ourselves.

Let’s begin with the Sadducees. Mark tells us that they didn’t believe in the resurrection. That’s why they were **Sad, you see**.

In America today, a belief in the resurrection is considered a part of orthodox Christianity. Bible conservatives believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so it would be easy to assume that since the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, that they must have held so-called “liberal” beliefs. But that’s reading modern Western beliefs into the ancient Word of God. In fact, the Sadducees were the conservatives of their day—politically as well as theologically. They regarded resurrection as a dangerous new idea.

The Sadducees were the ruling class in First Century Israel. Of course, Israel was subject to the Romans, so the Jews did not rule over their own land. Nonetheless, the Sadducees were determined to preserve whatever power they had, so they were opposed to any talk of resurrection. They simply did not want to draw the attention of the Romans on them.

That’s because the Sadducees saw belief in resurrection as politically risky. Two hundred years earlier in the Maccabean Revolt, the idea of resurrection had become popular as a way of affirming that those who died in the insurrection were martyrs and they therefore had a glorious future awaiting them in the eventual resurrection when they would be given new

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bodies. This belief was based on the fundamental idea that God was the Creator of the world, and therefore was also the Recreator, of the world.

People who believe that God is going to recreate the whole world, including Israel, including even their own dead bodies, are much more likely to do daring and risky things such as engage in revolution. And a revolution fueled by a belief in resurrection was sure to bring the wrath of Rome down on their heads.

In contrast, wealthy ruling class people were less likely to take such risks because they have so much more to lose. And the Sadducees, who were allowed to function as the ruling class in Israel, were committed to maintaining the peace and preserving whatever power they had. So they were opposed to any discussion of resurrection.

The Sadducees regarded the first five books of the Bible—known as the five books of Moses—as the only authoritative Word of God. And they found nothing in those five books of the Bible that substantiated a belief in life after death. As far as they could see, the idea of resurrection depended on very late, and to them, dubious books of the Bible, books like Daniel. Plus, the idea of resurrection depended on the speculations of groups like the Pharisees. The Pharisees did believe in the entire canon of the Old Testament, so that meant they also believed in resurrection. Complicating matters is that the Pharisees were much more influential among ordinary Jews, so it's likely that the most common Jews believed in resurrection.

In Mark 12, a group of Sadducees approach Jesus; they wanted to see whether he was on their side, or the same side as the dangerous, revolutionary Pharisees. So they tell Jesus a presumably hypothetical story which depends on an ancient Jewish law found in Deuteronomy 25 (vs. 5-10). If a man dies married but childless, his younger brother is commanded to marry his widow, and count the children as his brother's, thus keeping up the family line and inheritance. In the story, this happens seven times to one woman.

Now, I thought I could work in a reference to Johnny River's "The Seventh Son" from his 1965 album, *Meanwhile Back at the Whiskey A-Go-Go*, but I just couldn't find a way to make the song work, much to my disappointment.¹ Anyway, Sadducees hold up this crazy story about a black widow who works her way through seven brothers who all die after marrying her. Of course, there's nothing at all suspicious about seven brothers dying after they marry their sister-in-law. Nonetheless, the Sadducees put that story forth as evidence that resurrection is ridiculous: if they all come back to life, whose wife will the woman be?

Jesus boldly rebukes them: clearly, he says, they don't know their Bibles; nor do they know how powerful God is! Jesus then offers a double argument against their objection.

The first answer is that resurrection does not mean mere resuscitation, or coming back into exactly the same sort of physical life as they had before. Rather, resurrection is a complete *transformation*, and it comes with a different sort of bodily life.

¹ "Everybody's talking 'bout the Seventh Son. In the whole wide world there is only one. And I'm the one.

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That's an important statement, for as we profess in the Apostle's Creed, **we believe in the resurrection of the body**. We do not merely believe in life after death, because that could suggest a disembodied spirit-life. No, we will receive a new body in the resurrection.

That is the first point Jesus makes: resurrection, which he affirms for believers—not just himself—will not simply reproduce every aspect of our present humanity. It will be a recognizable and re-embodied human existence. But a great change will have taken place: we will be transformed, but we can only guess the nature of what we shall be because of that transformation.

Second, Jesus quotes a passage which lies at the heart of the five books of Moses. This passage, he claims, demonstrates that the dead will indeed be raised. When God meets Moses at the burning bush, he introduces himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. If this is how God chooses to reveal himself, argues Jesus, it cannot be the case that the patriarchs are dead and gone for ever. They may have died, but since God desires to be known as their God, there must be resurrection from death.

That means that resurrection is not another, somewhat nicer description of being dead. Rather, it is the reversal of death, the gift of a new body to enjoy life in God's new world.

And that is the promise of Jesus. He came to proclaim resurrection through his own body. For Christ died, was buried, and rose again from the dead in a new, resurrection body. And he did that not just for himself, but for us.

This morning, I invite you to become a risky liberal—I'm not advocating that you align yourself with a political party; rather, I'm advocating that you align yourself with the One who became the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, only to be raised up from the dead in resurrection. And let us together commit ourselves to that risky new idea, "for since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

Thanks be to God.